

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.4

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played ditter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a third-year.



Rozemyne

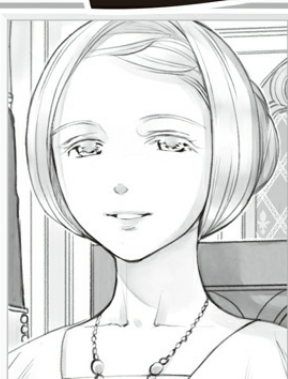
The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about nine, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A third-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a second-year.

Melchior

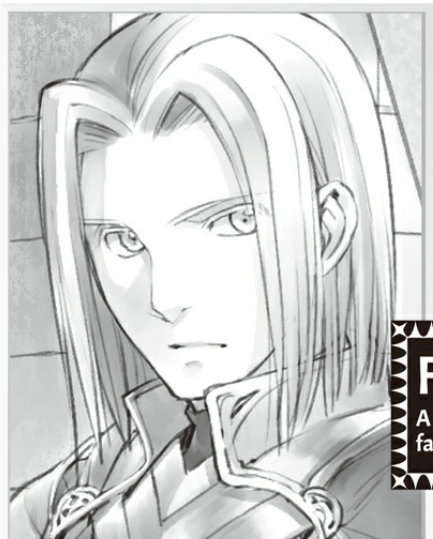
Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

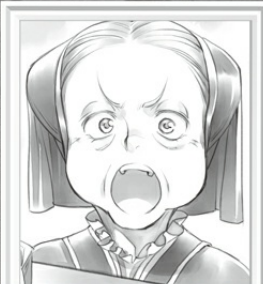
Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.



Rozemyne's Retainers



Rihyarda

Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.



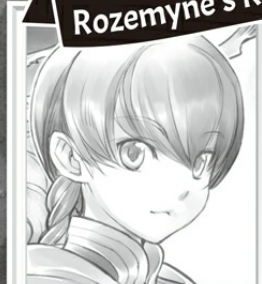
Lieseleta

Angelica's little sister and a medattendant.



Brunhilde

A fifth-year apprentice archattendant.



Gretia

A fourth-year apprentice medattendant. Gave her name.



Hartmut

An archscholar and the new High Priest. Otilie's son.



Muriella

A fifth-year apprentice medscholar. Gave her name.



Roderick

A third-year apprentice medscholar. Gave his name.



Philine

A third-year apprentice layscholar.



Cornelius

Karstedt's son and an archknight.



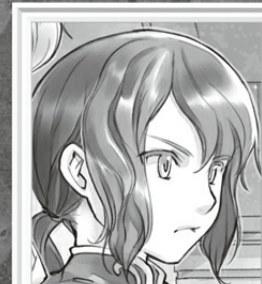
Leonore

An archknight. Engaged to Cornelius.



Angelica

Lieseleta's older sister and a medknight.



Matthias

A fifth-year apprentice medknight. Gave his name.



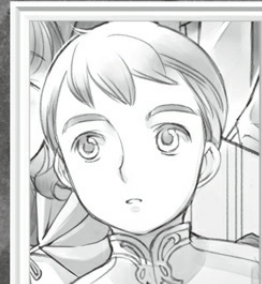
Laurenz

A fourth-year apprentice medknight. Gave his name.



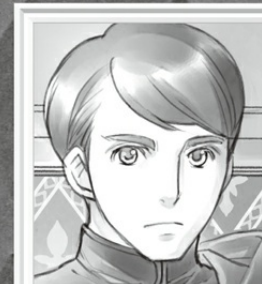
Judithe

A fourth-year apprentice medknight.



Theodore

A first-year apprentice medknight. Serves only in the Royal Academy.



Damuel

A layknight.

Otilie.....Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Karstedt.....Ehrenfest's knight commander.
Rozemyne's noble father.

Leberecht.....Florenzia's archscholar. Hartmut's father.

Oswald.....Wilfried's head attendant.

Lamprecht.....An archknight serving Wilfried. Karstedt's son.

Alexis.....An archknight serving Wilfried.

Barthold.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar serving Wilfried. Gave his name.

Elvira.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Aurelia.....Lamprecht's wife.

Trudeliede.....Karstedt's second wife.

Nikolaus.....Karstedt and Trudeliede's son.

Traugott.....A fifth-year apprentice archknight.
Rozemyne's former retainer.

Bertilde.....Brunhilde's little sister. A candidate for being Rozemyne's retainer.

Brigitte.....A mednoble from Illgner.
Rozemyne's former retainer.

Lasfam.....Ferdinand's layattendant.

Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Thorsten.....Wilfried's scholar. Engaged to Lieseleta.

Veronica.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Trauerqual.....The king. Carries the title of Zent.

Anastasius.....The Sovereignty's second prince.

Hannelore.....A third-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Clarissa.....An archscholar from Dunkelfelger. Engaged to Hartmut.

Ortwin.....A third-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.

Georgine.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlind.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Engaged to Ferdinand.

Letizia.....An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.

Sergius.....Ferdinand's attendant.

Lueuradi.....A third-year apprentice archscholar from Jossbrenner.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella.....Personal chef.

Hugo.....Personal chef.

Rosina.....Personal musician.

Lower City Family

Gunther.....Myne's dad.

Effa.....Myne's mom.

Tuuli.....Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.

Kamil.....Myne's little brother.

Temple Associates

Fran.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Zahm.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Nicola.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Gil.....In charge of the workshop.

Fritz.....In charge of the workshop.

Wilma.....In charge of the orphanage.

Lothar.....Works in the High Priest's chambers.

Ymir.....Works in the High Priest's chambers.

Kampfer.....A blue priest.

Frietack.....A blue priest.

Lily.....A gray shrine maiden.

Delia.....Rozemyne's former apprentice attendant.

Konrad.....An orphan. Philine's little brother.

Dirk.....An orphan. Delia's little brother.

Bertram.....A child of the former Veronica faction.

Marthe.....An apprentice gray shrine maiden from Hasse's monastery.

Lower City Merchants

Benno.....Head of the Plantin Company.

Mark.....Benno's right-hand man.

Lutz.....A leherl of the Plantin Company.

Gustav.....Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.

Freida.....Gustav's granddaughter.

Cosimo.....A leherl of the Othmar Company.

Otto.....Head of the Gilberta Company.

Corinna.....A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.

Gutenbergs

Ingo.....Foreman of a carpentry workshop.

Heidi.....Ink craftswoman. Josef's wife.

Josef.....Ink craftsman. Heidi's husband.

Zack.....A smith. Comes up with ideas.

Johann.....A smith. Turns ideas into reality.

Danilo.....A smith. Johann's apprentice.

Other

Leise.....A chef working for the Othmar Company.

Richt.....Hasse's mayor.

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Prologue

The blizzards stopped after the Lord of Winter was slain, allowing the sun to finally show itself and brighten the hallways. Just seeing all the light streaming in brightened Lamprecht's mood as he hurried to the knight commander's office.

Hopefully this is about giving me time off.

Having to manage the purge on top of the Lord of Winter hunt had made the start of the season busier than ever. Knights of the Order had needed to be involved in both, so most of them had barely even had a chance to visit home. Lamprecht in particular was being worked to the bone by his father, since he was a guard for the archducal family and apparently had "plenty of time" on his hands while his lord was at the Royal Academy.

The only knights who weren't working to such a ruthless schedule were those serving Rozemyne. They were still being allowed time off, meaning there were days when Lamprecht didn't even see them.

Meanwhile, I was only allowed to go home when my wife was giving birth.

Because his lord was away at the Royal Academy, it should have been easier for Lamprecht to secure days off... but that hadn't been the case at all this year. The purge had been carried out at the start of winter rather than the end, and the Lord of Winter hunt had needed to be done by a much smaller force than usual. It had been a cruel season as a result.

Now that the hunt was over, the knights were gradually being allocated time away from work—but, as this was happening in order of status, starting with the laynobles, Lamprecht still wasn't able to return home.

"Excuse me," Lamprecht said as he entered the office. Karstedt was waiting inside and holding a board, which he waved at his son with a look of exhaustion.

"Lamprecht, take this to the northern building. I am giving you two days off starting tomorrow. It isn't much, but spend it with your family."

“Yes, sir!”

The board was an official directive from the Knight’s Order, instructing Lamprecht to take some downtime. He accepted it, then looked at Karstedt with somewhat resentful eyes and said, “Why did you give Rozemyne’s guard knights so much more time off than the rest of us? I wanted breaks too.”

“Idiot. Cornelius and the others were only exempt from training because they had to stay in the temple. They were responding to a call for aid from Aub Ehrenfest and Hartmut, the High Priest. It wasn’t time off.”

Rozemyne was staying at the Royal Academy this term, so Lamprecht had assumed that her knights wouldn’t need to go to the temple. In truth, however, her retainers were having to fill the gap left by her absence.

“Can’t really announce that archducal retainers are doing the work of blue priests, can we?” Karstedt said. “That’s why I said they were exempt from training—but that’s had its own problems. If people think I’m showing favoritism toward Rozemyne’s guard knights or giving them more time off than anyone else, it’ll undermine my authority going forward.” He started massaging his brow. “What a headache... Though maybe it won’t be so bad now that the Zent recognized the utility of rituals.”

Lamprecht remembered the attendants’ complaining when they were asked to prepare ceremonial robes for Lord Wilfried. Reports from the Royal Academy had said that Rozemyne’s rampage was especially bad this year.

So... Father’s trying to manage her craziness as well as the Knight’s Order. That must be rough.

For the first time, Lamprecht took a closer look at his father’s face. It was weary from fatigue. His decision to start with the laynobles when allocating leave meant he had probably taken less time off than anyone. He had probably found at least *some* time to rest in the knight dorms, but he certainly hadn’t been able to go home.

“I hope you get some time off soon, Commander,” Lamprecht said.

“Mm. Would be nice to get a break before the Interduchy Tournament... I’m looking forward to going home.” It seemed that he was particularly eager to

meet his first grandchild.

Smiling at that last remark, Lamprecht left the commander's office with the board in hand and went straight to the northern building.

"Got some time off at last, Lamprecht? That's great."

"Make sure you rest up."

After arriving at the retainers' room, Lamprecht had shown the board to the others in Wilfried's service—and they had all congratulated him without missing a beat. The attendants and scholars had found it much easier to secure time away from work.

Lamprecht completed the necessary arrangements, then gave the other retainers a satisfied grin. From there, he sent ordonnances to his mother, Elvira, and wife, Aurelia, to inform them of the good news. They replied immediately.

"This is Elvira. Aurelia is currently in my care. Return to the main building today—though only after you have thoroughly cleansed yourself and changed your clothes. I do not want the stench of blood and battle sullyng my estate."

"This is Aurelia. I await your return."

The other retainers let out whistles and exchanged intimidated glances; they had been listening to the ordonnances as well. "Lady Elvira sure is scary..." one said. "She took her son's wife from Ahrensbach into her care...?"

"She doesn't like the smell of blood, huh?" added another. "Even though she's the first wife of the knight commander?"

Lamprecht sighed. "It may seem as if she's trying to get more power over Aurelia, but she's actually working to ease everyone's suspicions about her being from Ahrensbach."

Bettina had married into Ehrenfest at the same time as Aurelia and was espoused to the son of Giebe Wiltord—but when it was revealed that her in-laws had given their names to Georgine and that Bettina herself was communicating with Georgine through her home family in Ahrensbach, she was captured and executed.

Aurelia had been under Elvira's care ever since marrying into Ehrenfest. She

trusted Elvira to pick whom she interacted with, so she had never ended up socializing with Ahrensbach or nobles of the former Veronica faction. As a result, during the purge, she hadn't even been taken away for questioning.

Incidentally, Mother's request not to bring the stench of blood into the house must be because of the baby.

Thanks to Lamprecht, Elvira was now a grandmother. It was clear that she was fighting hard to protect Aurelia and the newborn.

"That seems pretty overcautious," one of the retainers said. "Nobody's going to imprison your wife, Lamprecht. You're a guard knight serving Lord Wilfried, the next archduke. We could have been arrested for what we did for Lady Veronica, but you can see for yourself that none of us were."

Several of the archducal couple's retainers had already been relieved of duty or imprisoned and punished, whereas Wilfried's retainers were completely undisturbed. Either out of optimism or a deliberate attempt to avoid reality, they were all trusting their lord to keep their families safe.

But retainers can't be relieved of duty until their lord or lady returns. If there are any criminals among us, they won't be punished before Lord Wilfried comes back.

Lamprecht couldn't bring himself to be anywhere near as hopeful, though he kept that fact to himself. He didn't want to inspire chaos or cause anyone to run away.

Following his mother's instructions, Lamprecht cleansed himself and changed clothes in the dormitory before flying off on his highbeast. The cold winter air pricked his skin like tiny daggers, but the sunlight was warm. He felt good for the first time in a while.

"Welcome home," Aurelia said upon his return. Elvira was with her.

"It's good to be back..." Lamprecht replied. "Oh? You aren't wearing your veil."

"I was told in no uncertain terms that our child must be able to see his mother's face..."

“I see. And where is our little boy?” Lamprecht hadn’t been home since attending the birth. He was looking forward to seeing his baby’s face, so not spotting him here made him anxious.

“I understand how you feel, but wait until after we’ve had dinner,” Elvira said chidingly. “A lot of arrangements were made so that you could eat with Aurelia. Do not let her nurses’ efforts or her own go to waste.”

Because a baby’s mana was so dependent on its mother, it was her duty to feed it—Lamprecht understood that much. But he *hadn’t* understood how much work was necessary for something as simple as him sharing a meal with his wife.

“You may rest easy,” Elvira continued. “Our house’s successor is growing steadily. Now, to the dining hall. We must hurry and eat.”

Eckhart’s move to Ahrensbach had required him to choose either Lamprecht or Cornelius to take over in his stead and temporarily manage his things. The two brothers had thus needed to discuss which one of them would leave the house.

Cornelius’s marriage to Leonore would be exceptionally beneficial to the Leisegangs, so the family wanted them as the house’s successors. Many also rejected the idea of a first wife from Ahrensbach becoming the future head of the estate. Lamprecht had no real interest in taking over—he knew that Aurelia would struggle when socializing with the less accepting members of their family—so he had suggested that they both leave and that Cornelius and Leonore move into a side building.

However, Elvira had refused the idea outright. “After the purge, how the public sees Aurelia will change immensely depending on if she resides in the estate of the knight commander,” she had said. “It makes no difference to our house whether you or Cornelius become its successor, so prioritize your pregnant wife from another duchy and secure a safe place for her to live.”

It would have been easy for Elvira to send Lamprecht and Aurelia out of the estate, and it would have satisfied their extended family. Despite that, she had chosen to put the safety of Aurelia and the baby above all else. It had warmed Lamprecht’s heart, and the knowledge that his mother was looking after his

wife had put him at ease even when he was unable to return home because of the purge and the Lord of Winter hunt.

“I did not think she would be staying in one of the main building’s guest rooms...” Lamprecht said.

“Putting her in a side building would have been too dangerous,” Elvira replied simply.

Because she was from Ahrensbach, Aurelia often received meeting requests from punished members of the former Veronica faction and those with close ties to Georgine. The smallest spark of controversy had the potential to make her a suspect, which was why Elvira had moved her to the main building and rejected all of the letters under her own name.

“Have you felt safe here, Aurelia?” Lamprecht asked.

“Indeed. Our son and I have been at peace, and there has been nary a moment of unease. Under normal circumstances, I would have been questioned by the Knight’s Order immediately after giving birth, but Lady Elvira stopped even that for my sake. Please be sure to show her your gratitude.”

Aurelia had managed to avoid a summons from the Knight’s Order by putting her social life—and everything else, for that matter—entirely in Elvira’s hands. Karstedt knew about Aurelia’s circumstances as well and had broken his back trying to assist her, even going as far as to very slightly abuse his authority.

Lamprecht sighed in relief and thanked Elvira, well aware of the situation.

“There’s no need for that,” Elvira replied. “You are aware that the purge has turned the public against the former Veronica faction and those from Ahrensbach, correct?”

“Correct. I heard that even some of the archducal couple’s retainers were imprisoned.”

“Indeed. Such is the fate of criminals, though their loved ones and close friends are going to struggle as well. In truth, Trudeliede was also detained; she took great pride in her time as Lady Veronica’s attendant and did a little too much work for her in the shadows.”

Trudeliede was Karstedt's second wife, whom he had married at Veronica's orders. Elvira, his first wife, had disapproved of the way she acted, so she had taken advantage of the purge to give the Knight's Order evidence of the crimes Trudeliede had committed for Veronica.

"Her son, Nikolaus, is staying at the castle for now," Elvira continued. "Keep a close eye on him so that he does not approach Rozemyne as her paternal half-brother. Cornelius tells me she has a soft spot for those younger than her; I do not want her asking us to save Trudeliede or reduce her punishment for her son's sake, nor do I want her asking for him to be moved to the main building."

Rozemyne had a tendency to rush to the aid of anyone in trouble—and, if a noble of the former Veronica faction exploited that, the end result would never be good. That said, guiding Rozemyne was supposed to be the duty of her retainers; Lamprecht rarely interacted with her.

"I was Lady Detlinde's guard knight before my marriage," Aurelia said. "Back then, when I was in peak form, a child yet to join the Royal Academy wouldn't have been a threat. But right now... Well..."

"You don't need to force yourself," Lamprecht replied. "I'll warn Rozemyne. I don't want Nikolaus in the main building either."

Nikolaus had started training as an apprentice knight and was taller and stronger than most others his age. Lamprecht didn't want him near Aurelia, who hadn't yet recovered from giving birth, or their newborn baby.

"Further," Elvira said, "we have closed down the building where Trudeliede was living. All those who served there have now been dispersed, and not a single one of them is allowed into the main building."

"Has that abrupt dismissal not put them in a very troublesome position?" Lamprecht asked. The commoner servants who had planned to spend the entire winter with Trudeliede had surely not made any winter preparations of their own. Lamprecht felt bad that they had all been forced out into the cold, but Elvira just sighed.

"What else could be done? I suggested that they seek work with the Knight's Order, which was hiring servants to look after the detained nobles, and that is the most I will do for them. My duty is to protect this estate, my son's wife, and

my new grandson. Thus, I cannot let those who served Trudeliede into the main building.”

Elvira had made her priorities clear, and she would eliminate anyone who posed even the slightest threat to them. It seemed a little harsh, but as the knight commander’s first wife, she had a sharp nose for danger.

She continued, “Because of these circumstances, I am keeping the baby’s existence hidden from even our family. I realize this is unfortunate—both for you and Aurelia and for the newborn—but any celebrations will need to wait until your son’s baptism.”

After a baby’s mana was checked, it was customary to inform one’s closest family and celebrate the birth, but none of that was going to happen this time. Lamprecht thought that Elvira was being excessively cautious, but her vigilance was also the reason he had been so comfortable leaving his wife in her care.

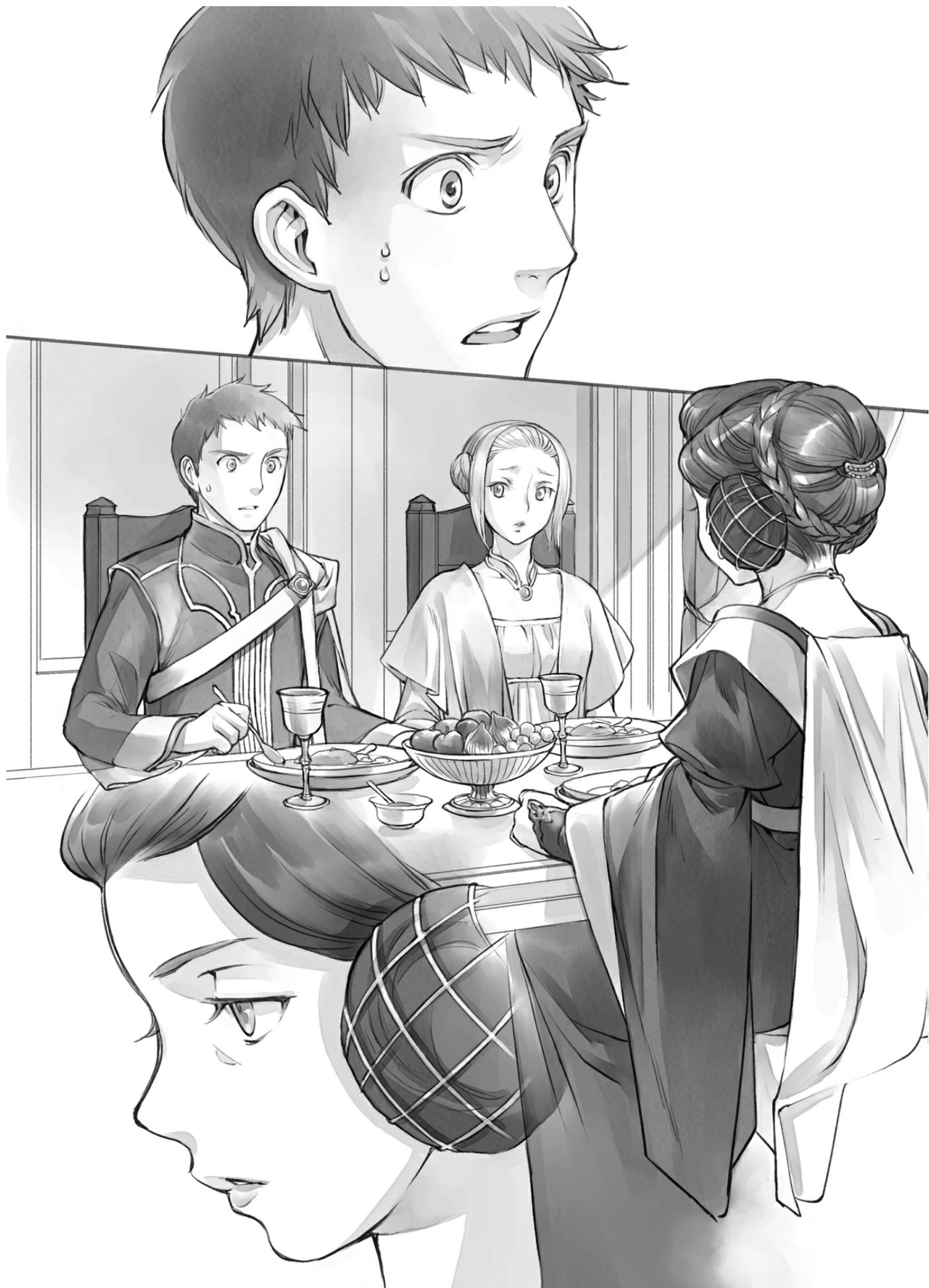
“Lord Lamprecht, might I ask you to at least inform Lady Rozemyne?” Aurelia asked in a quiet voice. “She has treated me well and was very much looking forward to the birth of our child. Do tell her personally.”

Lamprecht already knew the reason for his wife’s request: Rozemyne had done so much to make Aurelia feel comfortable in her new home. She had spoken to her when she first married into Ehrenfest, stayed with her when making a new cloth trend, and prepared an Ahrensbach dish for her when she was pregnant.

“I *could* secretly inform Rozemyne at the castle,” Lamprecht said, his gaze wandering to Elvira, “but would it not be better for Mother to summon her here? I doubt anyone will suspect we’ve had a baby from that alone.”

“No,” Elvira replied simply and with a smile. “We must keep her away from here for the time being—so that nobles of the former Veronica faction do not realize she is close to Aurelia *and* so that the Leisegangs trying to make her into the next aub do not become unnecessarily hopeful.”

The first reason was fair enough, but the second made Lamprecht’s eyes widen in shock. “How are the Leisegangs still a concern?” he asked. “Hasn’t the engagement made it clear that Lord Wilfried is going to be the next aub and Rozemyne his first wife?”



“The purge swept away the lust for revenge that was clouding Giebe Leisegang Emeritus’s heart,” Elvira said. “Finally at peace, he recently climbed the towering stairway.”

“Great-Grandfather...?”

As an archducal guard knight, Lamprecht had been told the names of those who were executed or punished, but he hadn’t known about any deaths beyond that. The fact that he was only hearing this now made it all the more tragic; there really hadn’t been much time for him to socialize this winter.

“But... Great-Grandfather hated the thought of Lord Wilfried becoming the next aub more than anyone!” Lamprecht exclaimed. “How does his passing change anything?!”

Elvira heaved a frustrated sigh. “He saw the purge as an act of revenge that would eliminate his enemies. Little wonder, then, that his dying wish was for Rozemyne to become the next aub. The unified elders are working to make that happen as we speak. Some are even trying to regain what Lady Veronica took from them.”

Their efforts to make Rozemyne the next aub weren’t going to include her parents, since they wouldn’t respond positively to the Leisengangs’ demands.

“Still, the crimes committed by Lady Veronica and her lackeys have nothing to do with Lord Wilfried and the aub, do they? I understand that Lady Veronica abused the Leisengangs, but the archducal family can’t be tarred with the same brush—not when they cast aside their own faction for the benefit of the duchy.”

Elvira merely laughed off such an obvious protest. “Goodness, what are you saying? During the purge, so many innocent people were detained and punished for the crimes of their relatives.”

Those attending the Royal Academy had managed to escape punishment by giving their names, but the adults hadn’t been so fortunate. Not all of them had been executed, but many had received punishments of varying severities. According to Elvira, the Leisengangs expected the archducal family—Veronica’s own blood—to be treated similarly.

“But years have passed since Lady Veronica was—”

“You would do well to realize that elders perceive time differently than you do,” Elvira said, her eyes sharp. “Two years to you is six to them.”

On top of that, Veronica had put them through more than three decades of misery. Lamprecht had yet to be born when it all started, and his head spun as he finally understood the extent of their suffering and the depth of their fury.

Elvira continued, “It might have been another story if Lord Sylvester had detained Lady Veronica immediately upon coming into power, but instead he remained inactive for the longest time. Consider also that she took charge of Lord Wilfried’s baptism. It should come as no surprise that so few nobles can separate the three in their mind.”

In all his time spent serving Wilfried, Lamprecht had never once considered such points. He had been targeted by Veronica before, but maybe due to how quickly it had passed or his own optimism, he hadn’t been able to understand what would inspire the Leisegangs to cling to their hatred so fervently and for so long.

“Putting his past actions aside,” Elvira said, “I praise the aub for having carried out the recent purge even at the cost of destroying his own faction. However, this has also made Leisegang the dominant force in both strength and numbers, meaning its influence will be considerably harder to resist. The archducal family will need to become a tight-knit unit going forward.”

As far as Lamprecht was concerned, the archducal family was already as close as could be. Was there even much else for them to do? As he racked his brain for ideas, he remembered having discussed the matter with his fellow retainers.

“The passage of time will not be enough for Lord Wilfried and the aub to escape Lady Veronica’s shadow,” Elvira said. “Likewise, no matter how great a wedge we try to drive between them, Rozemyne will always have a connection to Leisegang.”

“In that case, we should just get Rozemyne to gather the Leisegangs under her and...” Lamprecht was repeating verbatim what his fellow retainers had said to him, but he must not have paid enough attention to what he was saying. Elvira’s eyes sharpened, and she swiftly cut him off.

“Do not be foolish. How can you expect so much from her when the aub and we have kept her from socializing with them, fearing that they might absorb her even now that she’s been adopted into the archducal family? It would not be possible, especially considering her upbringing in the temple.”

His proposal in tatters, Lamprecht desperately searched for the words needed to avoid his mother’s wrath. He knew from experience that the last thing he wanted to do was displease her and put her in an uncooperative mood. Without her assistance, it would be much harder for him to gain information on the Leisegangs and work for the sake of his lord.

“Er, well... I mean... The printing industry she’s leading might have had its start in the province of her former retainer Brigitte, but its recent expansions have all been in provinces belonging to giebels in her family. I thought she might have been using that as an opportunity to socialize with them.”

“Then you could say that Rozemyne is socializing with the Leisegangs exactly as often as Lord Wilfried, who visits each province as a representative of the printing industry. And you accompanied him as his guard knight, did you not? I can only imagine how deep your bonds with our family must be.”

This time, Lamprecht fell completely silent. He had indeed traveled to various provinces with Wilfried to make sure preparations for the printing industry were complete, but he hadn’t socialized with any of the giebels as family.

So... Rozemyne’s the same way?

“Good grief...” Elvira said. “You have been socializing with our family since you were but a child, Lamprecht, so you are much closer to them than Rozemyne is. Even if your lord asks her to lead the Leisegangs, do not allow it. Shield her from them, if anything.”

Lamprecht hadn’t really socialized with his Leisegang family since he had started serving Wilfried—doubly so since he had married Aurelia from Ahrensbach. Being told to shield Rozemyne felt unreasonable as a result, but he couldn’t say something so weak in front of his wife; she was probably worrying that their marriage had caused all of these problems in the first place.

“We kept Rozemyne away from her family so that she would not become the next aub,” Elvira concluded. “If you or anyone else serving Lord Wilfried wishes

to close the distance we have so carefully established, then you are still outrageous fools without the slightest talent for gathering intelligence.”

“Er, I mean...”

It was precisely as Elvira had said—now that Wilfried was engaged and guaranteed to become the next archduke, his retainers were becoming too lax when it came to gathering information. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to just nod in agreement.

“How you gather intelligence and serve your lord is up to you,” Elvira remarked. “However, with the former Veronica faction now in such dire straits, you must be in a very tough position. Be as considerate about Lord Wilfried as you wish, but he always favors the former Veronica faction.”

“My lord would not be foolish enough to do that,” Lamprecht said flatly. “He also has an honest personality and listens to the opinions of others.”

Although the nobles all treated Wilfried as a member of the former Veronica faction, he had been torn away from Veronica just after his baptism—and the six years since then he had spent living by the rules of the archducal couple. He also wasn’t the kind of person to show favoritism when it came to factions.

“I see,” Elvira muttered with a heavy sigh. “Then I shall leave convincing him to you. Rozemyne cannot be made to control the Leisegangs as it will only create an opening for them to exploit.”

After that final nail in his coffin, Lamprecht felt an overwhelming urge to sigh. He would need to discuss matters with Cornelius and Rozemyne so they could work with him without Elvira knowing.

“You must be careful,” Elvira warned. “Most troublesome of all is that the Leisegangs almost have Lord Bonifatius on their side. It seems he strongly disapproves of Rozemyne being involved with the temple...”

“Grandfather does?”

“Yes, and securing his help will make the extremist faction more than capable of eliminating Lord Wilfried. The Ivory Tower incident has not been forgotten, and the only reason your lord can still become the next aub is because he is engaged to Rozemyne. Everyone knows she would be the obvious choice to rule

if he did not exist, and what follows from that logic need not even be stated.”

Lamprecht broke out in a cold sweat. It had never even crossed his mind that Bonifatius might become their enemy. The very idea was disastrous.

“You should inform Lord Wilfried that the absolute last thing he wants to do right now is provoke the Leisegangs. At the very least, he should wait until the archducal couple has finished meting out punishment and rearranging its retainers—or until after he is married and the Leisegangs have been forced to give up.”

Lamprecht nodded at his mother’s warning. It wouldn’t take too long for the archducal couple to reform its retainers.

“Lady Aurelia, may I have a moment?” a nurse asked, interrupting their meal. “The baby is hungry.”

Aurelia apologized and took her leave. It seemed that she wouldn’t be able to enjoy her dinner after all.

“A mother’s life revolves around her child,” Elvira said, fixing her own son with a glare. “Although this is your first holiday in some time, you must not let Aurelia tend to you. Instead, you should tend to her.”

She went on to speak at length about the difficulties a woman faced after giving birth, drawing generously from her own experiences. Lamprecht was pretty certain that her lectures had gotten even longer than usual, maybe because she was writing so many stories as of late.

“Aurelia could not summon her family for this birth,” Elvira continued, “and the purge has required her to move from the side building to the main one. Not even I can say how tense she must be at the current moment. Plus, even when I am working my hardest, there is only so much I can do as her mother-in-law; she needs her husband to support her too. Now, in my case, Karstedt would—”

“Then as you suggest, Mother, I will act entirely for her sake,” Lamprecht interrupted, having sensed that there would be no end to her rant. He had listened to her go on about what had happened after his birth more times than he could count and was far more interested in seeing his newborn baby.

After more or less fleeing the room, Lamprecht had one of the attendants

guide him to where his wife and son were staying. Along the way, he was reminded of the fact that they were living in a guest room.

“I assumed she would use my room, if any...”

“Your room is filled with magic weaponry, Lord Lamprecht. It would have been much too dangerous for your wife and child to stay there. Lady Aurelia was also opposed to changing or moving furniture so soon after giving birth.”

Aurelia had apparently said that she wanted to avoid any unnecessary hassle, which was why she had instead moved to a room furnished with everything she would need. It was an understandable decision—and one that was very much like her.

“The baby is currently being fed,” the attendant noted. “Enter quietly so as not to startle him.”

Lamprecht carefully entered the room, and there he was—his baby boy. As he recalled, his son’s face had been so red and mushy when he was first born that he’d actually looked more like a tiny animal with human features. He had also been small enough for Lamprecht to hold in his hands, but now he would need to be cradled in both arms. His chubby little body looked soft to the touch.

As he watched the baby eagerly breastfeed, Lamprecht felt a wave of emotion wash over him. “He’s getting bigger,” he said.

“Indeed,” Aurelia replied with a giggle. “I am sure he grows heavier with each passing day.”

“How’s life in the main building? Is it, er... tough living in Mother’s care?”

“Not in the least,” she said. “She has been refusing all invitations on my behalf and spoke with Lord Karstedt so that I would not have to visit the Knight’s Order so soon after giving birth. She also secured me a trustworthy nurse and is preventing any suspicious individuals from infiltrating the building. It is thanks to her that I can focus on caring for our baby.” Seeing the peaceful smile on his wife’s face was enough for Lamprecht to confirm that she was speaking from the heart.

Aurelia continued, “My birth mother is no longer with us, I do not have a good relationship with my little sister, and I do not think my father’s first wife would

have treated me so lovingly if I had married within Ahrensbach. Lady Elvira truly is the reason we can be so comfortable. Please thank her on behalf of us both.”

Upon learning that Trudeliede was imprisoned as part of the purge, Aurelia had assumed that she would suffer an even worse fate, considering that she was from Ahrensbach. However, Elvira had dealt with the Knight’s Order for her and even advised her to retreat to the main building.

“Our marriage has put you in a difficult position, hasn’t it?” Aurelia asked. “It pains me to know that I am the reason you cannot even debut your child to your family.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Really, I’m the one who feels bad. You’re in such a scary situation right now, but I haven’t been here for you when you’ve needed me most.” Lamprecht looked carefully at his son. He wanted to be around to see him grow, and that thought instilled in him a strong fatherly urge to protect this little being.

“An archducal retainer needs to prioritize their lord above all else—I understand that much,” Aurelia replied. “It was only for a short time, but I did serve Lady Detlinde.”

Lamprecht wasn’t serving Rozemyne; instead, he was a guard knight for Wilfried, whose retinue was full of people from the faction that had just been purged. He could somewhat predict what his position among them was going to be in the future.

“Lord Wilfried isn’t as fixated on factions as people think,” he said. “It shouldn’t take much for him to listen to reason.”

“I am worried about Lady Rozemyne too. She was concerned about me when I was pregnant and made various considerate arrangements for my sake, remember? I do not want to be the reason she is embroiled in family troubles.”

Aurelia had chosen the knight course on her father’s order. Then, after Alstede’s demotion to the rank of archnoble, she had been made to serve Detlinde to get close to Georgine. It had ended up being a terrible experience, and she didn’t want Rozemyne going through the same thing.

“Mother’s thinking ahead and worrying about all sorts of things. That’s just

the kind of person she is, but at the same time... it means she has a bunch of plans. Rozemyne doesn't intend to be the next aub, and that fact won't change no matter what the elders in Leisegang say. Not to mention, the archduke candidates are all on good terms and working around Lord Wilfried." He smiled and added, "A small matter like this won't even strain their relationship."

At that moment, the baby opened its tiny mouth with an equally small *pop*. Lamprecht watched closely as Aurelia picked up their son and patted him on the back. The infant gazed up at his father, looking him straight in the eye—and then burped.

"He's smiling..." Lamprecht said. "He must be satisfied from eating so much."

"Oh my. Can you recognize your father, little one?" Aurelia asked, holding the baby's teeny hand. "Let's ask him to hurry up and think of a name for you, then."

Lamprecht smiled. "I came up with a lot of names while we were apart. My first choice would be Siegrecht."

During those peaceful days with his wife and child, Lamprecht was unaware of the trouble to come. He didn't know that Wilfried would swallow Ortwin's words wholesale and return from the Royal Academy mistrusting Rozemyne, or that there was someone among Wilfried's retainers actively fanning the flames of that discord...

Returning Home and Everyone's Situation

"Hraaah! Rozemyne! You're back!"

No sooner had I teleported back to the castle than I was met with a deafening roar. It was Bonifatius, of course, and he was charging right at me with open arms! His every step produced what might as well have been a resounding *boom*, and I recoiled in shock despite myself.

Before I could be thoroughly crushed, my retainers sprang into action. Angelica and Cornelius each seized one of Bonifatius's arms, while Damuel grabbed his cape. Then, in a combined effort, they pulled him back and shouted, "Calm down! You're scaring her!"

After eventually coming to a stop, Bonifatius gave me an anxious look, trying to gauge what I was feeling. "I... I'm not scary. Right, Rozemyne?"

I shook my head. "I was just surprised to see your incredible speed, Grandfather. I am glad to be home."

Under normal circumstances, Karstedt, Elvira, the archducal couple, and the rest of the gang would all be here to welcome me, but I could only see Bonifatius, the archducal guard knights, and several other knights from the Order. Sylvester had also directed us archduke candidates to return at the same time rather than in order of our academic year. For some reason, this break in tradition left me feeling a bit uneasy.

"Rozemyne, you should get off the magic circle so that Charlotte can teleport over," Wilfried said. He had arrived immediately before me and was standing off to the side, surrounded by his guard knights.

I nodded in response, then moved out of the way with Rihyarda. My guard knights soon gathered around me in the same way that Wilfried's had gathered around him.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne."

"Thank you, Damuel, Cornelius, Angelica," I replied. "Oh, and where might

Hartmut be?”

“Otilie is keeping an eye on him while he bemoans not being here. Only we knights received permission to come greet you.”

“Mothers certainly are strong. Containing him cannot be an easy feat.”

While my guard knights were telling me about Otilie’s battle with her son, Charlotte arrived with her attendant. Her guard knights moved to protect her, then Bonifatius raised a hand to get our attention.

“Right. Let us get you all to your rooms. Fear not, for I am going to guard you until you reach the northern building!”

At his signal, Wilfried and Charlotte began to mobilize, their guards staying in formation around them. I started to follow, only to notice that Bonifatius was standing still and offering me his hand.

“Grandfather... is that really safe...?”

“Don’t worry. You can take his hand,” Cornelius assured me. “We’ll make sure he doesn’t hurt you.”

“Cornelius!” Bonifatius shouted, a fierce look in his eye, but Cornelius merely shrugged without so much as faltering.

“That wasn’t my concern...” I muttered. Still, I grabbed one of Bonifatius’s fingers, and together we started making our way to the northern building. “I attended my first awards ceremony this year. I went onstage and was celebrated for coming first-in-class. Oh, I also received praise straight from the Zent himself.”

Bonifatius rejoiced as sincerely as if my achievements were his own. Unlike last year, however, he wasn’t just looking at me; he was extremely wary of our surroundings.

“Grandfather,” I said, “could it be that things are especially dangerous at the moment?”

“They’ve calmed down, but a group of archduke candidates returning all together is a significant event. Nobles might come to plead for a reduced sentence or even use that as a cover to attack. People will probably assume

you're easy targets, since you didn't punish the students at the Royal Academy. Caution is needed."

"Is it only dangerous in the castle with all its nobles? Or will it also be dangerous outside?" Now that I was back in Ehrenfest, I'd planned to go straight to my new library—but if simply moving from the main building to the northern building was being treated with this much caution, I doubted that would be possible.

Bonifatius shook his head, wearing a stern frown. "I hate to say it, but the only place you can all move around freely is the northern building. At the very least, you'll need to be patient until the feast celebrating spring ends and the nobles start leaving. Melchior's been waiting there all winter. As his big sister, I'm sure you can manage too."

The start of the purge had inevitably made things more dangerous, which was why Melchior had been told not to leave the northern building without permission. He had even been forbidden from going to the playroom, meaning he was essentially under house arrest.

"Spend some time with Melchior," Bonifatius said to me. "I'm looking forward to dinner with you all tonight." He then pointed toward the northern building... and there was Melchior, standing with his retainers at the very edge of the hall.

"Welcome home, Brother, Sisters!"

"Staying in the northern building all on my own was really boring. I didn't get to see Mother or Father anywhere near as often as when I was in the main building. Then, to make things even worse, I got told that I couldn't go to the playroom. I'm not allowed to be around the other children in case someone whose parents were detained goes crazy and does something."

We had accepted Melchior's invitation to tea and were listening to him vent about his winter while our attendants took our things to our rooms. The plan had originally been for the purge to happen during the second half of the season, but the intelligence we'd received from Matthias and the others had made it necessary to start it much earlier. As a result, almost immediately after we students left for the Royal Academy, Melchior was locked away in the

northern building.

He had apparently been very forlorn having to spend his first winter after his baptism alone in the northern building. Florencia had tried to weave visits in between the busy periods, but it had still paled in comparison to when he'd seen her every day. It hadn't been long before he started to feel depressed.

"I mostly only ever got to speak with my retainers, so I'm glad you've all come back," he concluded.

I nodded. "We cannot leave until the feast celebrating spring is over, but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy ourselves in the meantime."

And so, we played karuta, cards, and such until our attendants called us for dinner.

The entire archducal family was present, and we discussed what had occurred at the Royal Academy. Melchior was overjoyed to finally be having a lively meal again; his eyes sparkled as he listened to us speak about our duchy's books spreading through the student population and the importance of prayer being recognized due to its connection to obtaining divine protections.

"Many more students obtained honor-level grades this year than last," Florencia said. "It is wonderful that you were all rewarded for participating in so many research projects."

"I'm impressed you managed to hold the dormitory together," Bonifatius added. "I thought for certain it would collapse. Good job."

Sylvester nodded. "You all did more as Ehrenfest archduke candidates than we had ever hoped. As your father and the archduke, I am proud of you all. Now, I want you to use your leadership skills to help guide the duchy out of the internal chaos this purge has created."

"Understood!"

We spent dinner being showered with praise—but as everything began to wind down, Sylvester's expression turned abruptly serious. "This was our first meal together in a long time," he said. "I chose the topics carefully so that we could all enjoy ourselves, but two days from now, at third bell, we're going to

have an archducal family meeting. It won't be pleasant, but we'll need to get through it together."

Two days from now. Third bell.

I swallowed hard. The prickliness in Sylvester's eyes seemed to embody the entire atmosphere of the castle right now.

Over breakfast the next morning, I introduced my new retainers from the Royal Academy to my retainers who had stayed home in Ehrenfest. Theodore wasn't present—as per our agreement, he only served me at the Academy—but everyone else was here.

"Matthias, Laurenz, Muriella, and Gretia have given their names to me and are now my retainers," I said. "The plan is for Muriella to one day entrust her name to my mother, Elvira, instead."

"Matthias and Laurenz, huh?" Cornelius repeated. "The sons of Giebe Gerlach and Giebe Wiltord, respectively." His face twisted in the slightest grimace; Matthias's and Laurenz's families had been central figures among the nobles who had given their names to Georgine.

"Cornelius, do not glare at them," I said, protectively moving in front of the four. "They have given me their names already."

He sighed and patted my head. "I gathered from the Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony that they won't directly act against you, but many nobles are still calling for their punishment. On the other side of things, there are just as many voices saying their punishment should be reduced."

"Cornelius isn't doubting their loyalty or suggesting that they mean you harm," Damuel interjected. "He's just worried that any anger and dissatisfaction meant for them will end up being directed at you instead."

I whispered my thanks to Cornelius. It didn't surprise me that the situation in Ehrenfest wasn't as calm as in the Royal Academy, but things were apparently a lot grimmer than I'd expected.

"You all know Hartmut from when he came to the Academy for the ritual, correct?" I asked my retainers from the dormitory. "Otilie is his mother and my

attendant. As for Damuel, Cornelius, and Angelica, they are my other guard knights. Those of you who are knights as well should follow Damuel's instructions when it comes to work. Damuel, choose the order in which the knights will visit the temple, Matthias and Laurenz included. Scholars may distribute work identically to last year, while apprentice attendants may continue cleaning up."

After delegating work to my retainers, I took the magic tool given to me by Ferdinand out of my luggage. I was also very curious about the mana-resistant leather bag containing a second magic tool and a top secret note.

"I shall open this in my hidden room," I said.

"Do lend me the magic tool once you have listened to its messages," Lieseleta chirped. "I will make it into a shumil."

I smiled and nodded. Then, I entered my hidden room, set the leather bag down, and played the first magic tool that Ferdinand had given me.

"It starts with chidings, as I recall... but I'm sure that's because he saved all the good messages for last!" I declared, pumping myself up. "I believe in you, Ferdinand!"

I touched the feystone, and the recordings began to play. There were nothing but criticisms from start to finish.

"So mean, Ferdinand... You could have put at least one line of praise in here. It didn't need to be a rare and valuable 'very good' or anything like that—a simple 'not bad' would have sufficed..."

Crestfallen, I opened up the leather bag and took out the other magic tool and a piece of paper.

"Hm...?"

The bag was empty now, but it still felt strangely heavy. I dug around inside, wondering whether there was something I'd missed, but to no avail.

"Wait, does it have a false bottom?"

I hadn't noticed due to the weight and shape of the magic tool, but the underside of the leather bag was hiding a secret. I opened the note and could

tell from the handwriting that it was from Ferdinand.

“As per your request, this magic tool contains words of praise. Keep it inside the bag at all times and ensure that nobody else hears its messages. Further, only use it within the library’s hidden room. If you violate any of these rules, the praise will automatically be deleted.”

“Hold on, what?! When did you come up with this?!”

He definitely hadn’t mentioned making a magic tool that could delete its own recordings. I read the note over and over again, then returned the tool to the bag.

“I’m glad I didn’t touch the magic tool first...” I muttered; it would have been so easy for me to accidentally break one of the rules and cause such rare words of praise to be deleted. “Thankfully, I’m naturally drawn to reading above all else.”

I was very curious about the praise, but Ferdinand had gone out of his way to record it on another magic tool so that other people wouldn’t hear it. Plus, I would be profoundly upset if my own impatience caused all of the messages to disappear. I decided to keep it inside the leather bag and not take it out of my hidden room; the last thing I wanted was someone accidentally touching it and activating the trap.

“Lieseleta,” I said, “this magic tool contains nothing but harsh words. Turning it into a shumil might just result in the most critical stuffed toy known to man. Are you sure you want to birth such a creation?”

“Of course,” Lieseleta replied, accepting the magic tool with an overjoyed smile. She adored any and all shumils—even a tiny Ferdinand one that would do nothing but admonish you.

Wow... Her love of shumils is unrivaled.

“Lady Rozemyne, where is the magic bag?”

“Still in my hidden room. It contains a second magic tool that speaks words of praise, but Lord Ferdinand rigged it with a trap that will erase them all if they’re played at the wrong time or place.”

Rihyarda cackled. “How like him. He must be shy about saying nice things.”

That may be so, but that’s no reason to create an elaborate self-deletion trap!

Lamprecht and Nikolaus

After leaving my hidden room, I sorted information with the scholars until third bell, then practiced harspiel with my siblings and started reading the books I'd borrowed. This was for Melchior's sake, since he had spent such a long time by himself.

"My sincerest apologies, Lady Rozemyne," Lamprecht said, "but may I have a moment of your time this afternoon? There is much I wish to discuss with you."

I stared at him in surprise; it was rare for him to address me so formally. I also wasn't sure how to respond. How could I meet with him when I couldn't leave the northern building?

"Rihyarda?" I said.

"It must be urgent for him to have asked," she replied. "As you have no plans this afternoon, you may speak with him. Use your room, but have Leonore and Angelica stay with you."

I was engaged now, so it made sense to have some of the girls accompany me. I turned back to Lamprecht and said, "Very well. This afternoon, then."

Lamprecht came almost immediately after lunch. Our attendants poured us some tea, then swiftly took their leave.

"It's rare for you to approach me directly, Lamprecht."

"Well... this is something I need to tell you myself." He scratched his cheek, then gave me a kind smile that I recognized in an instant.

"Your baby was born, I presume?"

"Yep. At the beginning of winter. We were expecting him in autumn, but he must not have been in much of a hurry."

"Congratulations! Let us begin the celebrations at once—"

"We assumed you would go nuts upon hearing the news," Cornelius

interjected and rolled his eyes. “That was why we’ve been keeping quiet about it.” He then told me that I wasn’t to make the information public under any circumstances.

“But why?” I asked. “We’re siblings! It should be fine for us to celebrate the birth, right?”

Florencia was having a baby too, but I wouldn’t even be able to meet the child until they were baptized. Lamprecht was my brother, though, which meant I was allowed to see his kid whenever.

“I’m glad that you’re so excited,” Lamprecht said, “but we’re planning to keep the birth a household secret for now. A celebration would complicate that.”

“A secret? Why’s that?”

The commoner way of celebrating a birth was to tell everyone about it so that it would stick in their memory. Nobles only told those close to them until the child was baptized, but they rarely made a conscious effort to keep the birth a secret, and there was no rule against celebrating.

“The purge targeted those who gave their names to Georgine and the nobles of the former Veronica faction,” Lamprecht began. “Those with Ahrensbach blood or who had shown favoritism to the faction were likewise punished. As you know, my wife is from Ahrensbach as well, so I worry that she and our child will not be treated kindly. To spare them any abuse, we want to keep this news exclusively among our close family.”

Cornelius nodded and continued with the hard expression he wore at work, “Those of us who didn’t go with you to the Royal Academy were at the front line of the purge, and it’s impossible to say who holds a grudge against us. That’s why we don’t want any large-scale celebrations.”

“Aurelia’s become very sensitive to the movements of Ahrensbach-aligned nobles, and we want to make things as peaceful as we can for her. Keep this a secret for us, Rozemyne, so she and our baby can be as safe as possible.”

Lamprecht had always come across as kind of unreliable, but his expression as he spoke about protecting his family reminded me of Dad. It actually warmed my heart a little.

“Got it,” I said. “I won’t tell a soul. I *did* want to see your baby right away and throw a huge celebration, but safety comes first. You’re trying to protect your family, after all. I can ask you questions while we’re here, though, right? Is the baby doing well?”

Lamprecht broke into a smile. “Aurelia’s been in a bit of a daze, maybe because she keeps having to wake up in the night to breastfeed, but the baby is very healthy. He’s even started to hold his head up. For safety’s sake, they’re living in the main building instead of a side one.”

Apparently, Lamprecht had joked about how Aurelia was only ever sleeping or breastfeeding. Elvira had immediately scolded him for that, saying that it just went to show how hard it was being a mother. Thoughts of life with a baby made me think of my short time with Kamil.

“By the way—Cornelius, when do you and Leonore plan to marry?” I asked, turning to look at the couple, who were sitting beside one another. Cornelius had been given Eckhart’s estate, so maybe their Starbind Ceremony would be as early as this summer.

“You’re making exactly the same face as Mother when she’s about to tease us,” Cornelius replied, then made eye contact with his future wife. “The preparations normally take a year or two. We’re already engaged, so why rush the ceremony?”

“I feel the same way,” Leonore agreed. “It would also be best to wait until the situation in Ehrenfest has calmed down.” It was good to see them getting along so well.

“Well, whenever your Starbind Ceremony happens, you can count on me,” I assured them. “I’ll give you the blessing of a lifetime.”

“A normal blessing will do!” Cornelius sputtered. “A normal one! Nothing good will come of you going all out!”

“No, no, no! That won’t do!” I protested. “This is my brother’s wedding we’re talking about! I’ll give you a blessing that will rival even the one given during the royal family’s Starbinding—”

“Please, no!” Cornelius exclaimed, waving his hands in a desperate attempt to

stop me. Leonore giggled in amusement as she watched him panic.

“Anyway... that’s all the good news,” Lamprecht said, interrupting our back-and-forth. “We need to speak about Nikolaus.”

Everyone’s expression hardened. Nikolaus was Karstedt’s son with his second wife, Trudeliede, which made him my half-brother, but his mother’s distaste for Ferdinand and history serving Veronica meant I’d been told to avoid him.

“Trudeliede was imprisoned too,” Lamprecht continued. “You know that, right?”

“I do. She was really invested in Lady Veronica and was evidently doing a lot behind the scenes.”

“Well, as we speak... Nikolaus is in the playroom.”

My eyes widened. “Still...? Has Father not taken him in and brought him home?” My face twisted into a grimace. “It seems too cruel to make him spend an entire season in the playroom when he has a parent so close by.”

Cornelius frowned. “Father led the purge. He’s gone to speak with Nikolaus on a couple of occasions, but actually taking him in isn’t an option. We can’t have a kid his age all alone in a side building, can we?”

“A side building?” I repeated. “Why would he go there when Mother is in the main building?”

“Nikolaus isn’t her son. Why would Mother agree to care for him?” Lamprecht asked. Cornelius looked just as taken aback.

“Um, why wouldn’t she?”

Leonore chimed in, “Are you perhaps not aware of the distinction between siblings who share a mother and those who don’t? You were raised in the temple and were baptized as Lady Elvira’s child, after all. It would be okay for her to start caring for Nikolaus with his mother’s permission, but Lady Trudeliede is imprisoned, meaning her thoughts on the matter cannot be confirmed.”

Cornelius and Lamprecht nodded, only now realizing why this was so hard for me to grasp. Angelica nodded too, seeming to suggest that she understood.

“In order for Mother to take in Nikolaus without his birth mother’s permission, she would need to adopt him,” Lamprecht explained, “and that would cause problems upon Trudeliede’s eventual return from her punishment. Mother herself said it would be best for him to stay in the playroom. We can’t start caring for him when his own mother is unable to consent.”

I was shocked. Even though we lived in the same estate, Nikolaus was being treated as though he were from another family entirely. If not sharing the same mother was this big of a deal, there were probably more children left in the playroom than I’d thought.

I murmured, “But if a child in this situation had their father’s support, I’m sure the other wives would look after them to at least some degree, half-relation or not...”

“Nikolaus, Matthias, and the others haven’t been deemed guilty by association, but that doesn’t change the fact that their parents are criminals. Though they have escaped punishment, that won’t change how society views them. I expect few would want to take such children into their home.”

Even back on Earth, the families of criminals had been harshly scrutinized. The most I could do was quietly respond that Nikolaus was still only nine years old.

“‘Only’?” Cornelius repeated. “Rozemyne, he is *already* nine years old. Considering how Trudeliede might have raised him and how he must feel about his own father imprisoning her, I do not want him in the main building. Especially since he is training to become a knight.”

Lamprecht nodded. “I care more about the safety of Aurelia and our baby than a mere half-brother, and I’m opposed to putting an apprentice knight who might get emotional in the main building. It doesn’t help that Nikolaus is tall, in good shape, and very talented according to Grandfather. If my wife were in peak condition, she could easily take him down, but she’s still recovering from the birth.”

Gotta admit, I’m finding it hard to imagine a woman who hides behind a veil and meekly shuffles around “taking down” an apprentice knight. I know she took the knight course, but that didn’t seem to fit her personality at all.

“Trudeliede was devoted to Lady Veronica and against Lord Ferdinand,”

Lamprecht continued. “She mocked our mother both when Eckhart gave Lord Ferdinand his name and when she took you in from the temple. She rarely showed her face in the main building, but I despise her, and I don’t want to take in anyone whom she raised. It’s best for Nikolaus to stay in the playroom until her punishment is over.”

“I... guess...”

I understood the circumstances surrounding Nikolaus, but something still didn’t feel right. He was being treated way too harshly for someone who hadn’t done a single thing wrong.

“How many children are going to be left in the playroom after the feast celebrating spring?” I asked. “Could we perhaps move them to the orphanage?” My hope was to get them somewhere they could be more at ease.

Cornelius’s and Leonore’s eyes shot wide open.

“Rozemyne, what’re you thinking?!”

“Lady Rozemyne, making such a drastic move on a whim is simply too much!”

Maybe she was right, but I couldn’t bear to leave the kids stranded where they were. Living in the castle’s main building meant they were always exposed to the judgmental eyes of adult nobles.

“Lamprecht,” I said, “I believe one of Charlotte’s retainers is looking after the playroom. I want to speak with them about this. Cornelius, summon Hartmut. I have questions about the current status of the orphanage.”

At my instruction, Lamprecht and Cornelius exited the room, both wearing looks of resignation. Hartmut came in immediately after, wearing a broad smile. It was like he’d been waiting right outside the door.

“You called, Lady Rozemyne?”

I asked Hartmut about Nikolaus, the status of the orphanage, and how many of the children were going to have their parents come for them in spring.

“There have been five requests thus far. I should note that the children of second and third wives are much more likely to be abandoned, and we have received no news regarding the children without magic tools.”

“I see... Do you think the orphanage will have enough room for those who end up being left in the playroom?”

Hartmut cast his orange eyes down in thought. “Housing them would not be an issue—the funding could still come from their parents and the purged nobles—but unlike the pre-baptism children, those in the playroom are already being treated as nobles. I do not know whether they would obediently listen to gray priests and shrine maidens, and they would presumably struggle to live as and with gray-robles.”

As he said, while the pre-baptism children weren’t yet official nobles, the children in the playroom absolutely were.

“Lady Rozemyne,” came Gretia’s voice, “Lord Wilfried requests permission to enter.” I nodded, and immediately he came inside, looking worried.

“Lamprecht told me you’re about to cause trouble again,” he said. “What are you planning this time?”

“The prospect looks grim...” I said with a shake of my head, then explained the general idea of moving the abandoned children from the playroom to the temple’s orphanage.

Wilfried gave me a look of momentary exasperation, then sighed. “You want to shelter them from the eyes of society because you feel sorry for them? Hiding them won’t change anything, you know; their parents committed crimes and were punished as a result. Instead, shouldn’t you tell them to puff out their chests and live with pride? That they haven’t done anything to be ashamed of?” He was looking straight ahead all the while, and it was clear that he was speaking from experience. No matter how much someone tried to hide, there would always be nobles backbiting them.

“Well, hiding them from the public eye is one reason to move them, but Melchior couldn’t go to the playroom this winter, right? He said that he spent the entire winter with his retainers, studying.”

“He did say that.”

“If all the teachers were with him, then what was the winter like for those in the playroom? How can they receive a proper noble education without

someone to guide them?”

“This is outside of your purview,” Wilfried said plainly. “Mother is in charge of the playroom, so speak with her if you have some concerns. Don’t go butting into people’s lives when they haven’t asked you to.”

He was right, and that realization made me loosen up a little. I could speak to Florencia about this problem, but it was ultimately something for her to resolve.

“Besides, you don’t need to think about *all* the kids. Just focus on Nikolaus.”

“On Nikolaus...?” I repeated, blinking in confusion.

“Yeah,” Wilfried replied with a nod. “He’s petitioning to serve the archducal family as an archknight, and you’re his foremost choice. It seems that he wants Lord Bonifatius to dote on him like he does on Cornelius and Angelica, plus he envies your relationship with Cornelius.”

I was at a loss for words. Nobody had told me before.

“But you’ve been kept away from him because you don’t have the same mother,” Wilfried continued. “He said he hasn’t been able to speak a single word to you, and when he told his parents that he wants to serve you, they instantly shot him down.”

“For the record, our father wasn’t the one who refused him,” Lamprecht clarified with a sigh. “It was his mother, Trudeliede. She said that she would not permit him to serve someone who was raised in the temple.”

In other words, it was true that Nikolaus had asked to be my retainer. I gazed at Cornelius, who had forbidden me from meeting with him. “I didn’t even know that he wanted to serve me. This is my first time hearing any of this.”

“That’s because we decided it would be better for him to serve Lord Wilfried,” Cornelius replied with a smile. “His wish to become an archducal retainer would still be granted, and Trudeliede wouldn’t complain about her son serving Lady Veronica’s precious grandson. He could even start getting to know his siblings thanks to Lamprecht being there too.”

Wilfried glared at Cornelius and shook his head. “Nikolaus isn’t asking to serve me, though; he wants to serve Rozemyne. Is it not bad enough that he’s been

abandoned in the playroom? How can we deny him the future he desires on top of that? We should at least let the kids who weren't punished choose their own lords or ladies."

Cornelius's smile became very obviously forced. "Perhaps I would share your perspective if this were the child of anyone but Trudeliede, who is still persistently loyal to Lady Veronica. Furthermore, whether the students who evaded punishment by association get to choose whom they serve depends on whether they choose to give their names. Maybe I would trust Nikolaus a little more if he gave his name as Matthias and the others did."

In response, Wilfried suddenly looked a little more wooden.

Lamprecht glowered at Cornelius, then sighed. "Lord Wilfried, Trudeliede is a dangerously biased woman. She was of the firm belief that Rozemyne worked with Lord Ferdinand to deceive the aub and secure her adoption, all the while using underhanded means to trick the former High Bishop and subsequently incriminate Lady Veronica."

Well, it would be more accurate to say that Ferdinand used me. Lady Veronica and the High Bishop then walked straight into his trap, due in no small part to Sylvester's intervention.

I thought back to that time and sighed. I couldn't help feeling bad for Nikolaus, since I'd never met Trudeliede myself, but I also couldn't blame Elvira and Cornelius for not wanting to take him in.

"Rozemyne," Cornelius said, interjecting before I could even speak. "You are so sympathetic to the children because they have committed no crimes and are without guilt, but as your guard knight, I cannot allow you to create openings for dangerous people to exploit. You are at risk enough already."

The sight of my guard knights all collectively nodding was enough for me to realize what a challenge it would be trying to speak with Nikolaus.

I really want to have a face-to-face conversation with him, though. At least once.

Archducal Family Meeting

At third bell the next day, we archduke candidates left the northern building with all our guard knights, plus one scholar and attendant each. The situation was definitely being treated with more caution than was normal; instead of our usual meeting room, we were gathering in the one closest of all to the northern building. Sylvester, Florencia, Bonifatius, Wilfried, Charlotte, and I all went inside. Melchior and his retainers now took the spot that had once belonged to Ferdinand.

Thus began our meeting.

“There’s a lot to report this time,” Sylvester said. “First, Florencia’s pregnancy. We expect her to give birth either around the end of summer or the start of autumn. I want to distribute our current workload with her inevitable ill-health in mind.”

His announcement caused a stir. This was going to complicate both the plan for him to take a second wife and administration as a whole. But while everyone was exchanging looks of concern, I didn’t even blink. I already knew about Florencia’s pregnancy, so I took the opportunity to extend words of celebration.

“Congratulations,” I said to her. “I look forward to autumn.”

“I thank you ever so much, Rozemyne,” she replied, her expression softening into a smile.

Melchior beamed and spoke up as well. “Congratulations, Mother. This means I’m getting a little brother or sister, right?”

“Yup,” Sylvester replied on her behalf, then gazed across all of the gathered retainers. “But keep it a secret for now. Alright?”

Charlotte had been looking down at her feet, her expression stiff, but she finally looked up again in an apparent show of resolve. “We would not wish to put Mother in danger,” she said. “We *will* keep this a secret, and I will provide

all the support I can.”

“I appreciate that. Now, moving on... I want to focus next on the purge carried out over the winter. We all understand that getting Ehrenfest back on its feet is our highest priority, yeah?”

And so, the reports began. The purge had started earlier than planned after Matthias and the others gave us an urgent update, and those who were found to have given their names to Georgine were targeted first. The most notable raid was on Giebe Gerlach’s estate; many of the people there had committed suicide, and only a few of them had been registered as Ehrenfest nobles.

“Father, I don’t understand,” Wilfried said. “Does that mean there was a large group of people from outside Ehrenfest in Giebe Gerlach’s estate?”

“You know how your mana was registered to a medal when you were baptized, right? The mana from those medals can be compared to the mana from a noble’s corpse to confirm their background. In this case... there were a number of corpses that we couldn’t identify.”

His phrasing sent a shudder down my spine, but I already had an idea of who those corpses might have once been. “Perhaps they were Devouring soldiers. They were used when I was ambushed and Charlotte kidnapped, correct?”

There had also been the time when, after visiting Gerlach during my first Spring Prayer as a shrine maiden, Tuuli and I were almost kidnapped in the lower city. *And* the time when the gray priests were abducted.

“Right,” Sylvester said. “The soldiers who exploded when attacking Charlotte’s baptism ceremony were also unidentifiable. We expect these to be the same.”

“Erm, did Giebe Gerlach explode too?” I asked, looking at Bonifatius, who had charged into his winter estate. “Somehow, I find that hard to believe.”

Bonifatius frowned. “The situation led me to conclude that he did, but I did not see it with my own eyes. The thing is... I wanted to charge in and grab him with my schtappe, but I was told that would be too aggressive. And, of course, the butler at the door tried to keep us from going in at all. That gave the giebe all the time he needed. By the time we reached the room where he was holding his meeting, it was all up in flames. There was nothing left inside but burning

flesh.”

Though his explanation was quite bare, the state of the room sounded so nightmarish that I didn’t even want to imagine it. Part of me had wanted to cover my ears when he started telling us how the butler had also exploded the moment Bonifatius charged through the doorway... but I’d ended up listening anyway, rubbing my goose-bump-covered arms while trying to fend off the gory visuals.

“We compared our medals with whatever limbs still remained, but several of them couldn’t be identified. We found a left hand with Giebe Gerlach’s ring and crest, and that *did* respond to a medal... but I don’t buy that it was really him. There has to be more to it. There was far too little left behind...”

Bonifatius’s warrior instincts meant he was skeptical—but after seeing the scene with his own eyes, he still wasn’t confident that Giebe Gerlach was dead.

“Is it possible that he just cut off his hand and ran away?” Wilfried asked.

Bonifatius crossed his arms and grunted. “I could tell from the smell of the blood and the warmth of the corpses that I got in there right after he exploded. The estate was surrounded by knights, who didn’t see any fleeing highbeasts, and escaping through the sewers with its mana-eaters would be next to impossible for a noble. We also had commoner soldiers watching all other exits, and we received no reports of any of them getting hurt or acting suspiciously.”

Sylvester nodded. “I raised the city’s barrier to its maximum strength so that no nobles would be able to escape, assigned knights to even the northern gate, and told the commoner guards not to let a single carriage or wagon through. The reports say that no highbeasts or carriages left Ehrenfest that day.”

But even with that much evidence, Bonifatius hadn’t been able to accept that Giebe Gerlach was dead.

“Bonifatius was still doubtful, so we took the medals of all those Matthias confirmed were name-sworn to Georgine and carried out formal executions.”

“You mean... the God of Darkness method...?” I asked timidly, recalling the executions in Hasse. It was one of the spells I had learned when Ferdinand was helping me cram for the archduke candidate course.

Despite my vague description—there were people here who weren't archduke candidates, so I'd needed to be careful—Sylvester seemed to understand. He nodded, his expression stern.

"But I thought that spell wouldn't work on those not in the aub's realm of control..."

"Rozemyne, how could someone escape Ehrenfest if not by highbeast or a carriage?"

"U-Um..." I paused to consider the abrupt question. "A teleportation circle, maybe?"

"Giebe Gerlach wouldn't have been able to use one," Sylvester answered, exasperated. "Magic circles that can teleport people require the aub's authority." I'd also heard as much from Ferdinand when he was teaching me about magic circles. Human teleportation was so consequential that only aubs could make and operate the means to it.

"Anyway..." he said, moving the conversation along. "We used the medals that matched corpses found on the estate to carry out the executions. Giebe Gerlach, real name Grausam, is dead—I want us to move forward on that basis. Our problem right now is figuring out whether other nobles are name-sworn. The process tends to be carried out in secret, and while the names that Matthias gave us seem to have been accurate, even their memories were distorted from trug. Continuing our investigation hasn't been easy."

As things stood, they had no choice but to make guesses based on the criminals' associations. It was a precarious situation; they needed to be very careful not to execute any innocents.

"Ah, that reminds me," Sylvester said. "Rozemyne, Wilfried, Charlotte—as part of their investigation, the Knight's Order will need to borrow those who gave their names to you."

As it turned out, they specifically wanted children of the giebes who had sworn themselves to Georgine. Giebes Gerlach, Wiltord, and Bessel were given special mention.

Sylvester continued, "After the purge, the Order began inspecting the giebes'

summer estates, but such mansions are teeming with doors that only open for registered family members. These hidden rooms and such will become completely inaccessible once new giebels are assigned, so we want to investigate them before then.”

Reregistering my mana with the hidden room in the orphanage director’s chambers would cause my old room to be lost forevermore. In the same vein, if the giebels were replaced and the registrations redone, several places in their estates would become inaccessible.

“I understand why it’s urgent for the estates to be investigated,” I said, then shot Karstedt a very deliberate look. “I will instruct Matthias, Laurenz, and Muriella to cooperate with the Knight’s Order, so please treat them well. They are my retainers now.”

He nodded with a reliable smile. “I will make sure the knights are well aware. Of course, we will treat those serving Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte with just as much consideration.” Then, his features began to harden, and a stern light arose in his light-blue eyes. “But in return we ask you, their lord and ladies, to stress that they are not to hide the crimes of their families.”

“Understood,” I replied, aware that they would need to cooperate if they wanted to survive. Wilfried and Charlotte nodded as well.

“Moving on,” Sylvester said. “As an adult myself, it pains me to admit this, but...” He trailed off, then very wearily tapped a stack of boards. “Ehrenfest has spent such a long time at the bottom of the rankings that not many of us know how to interact with top-ranking duchies. You know that, yeah? Well, we’re now so high up that we need to start acting like a top-ranking duchy ourselves.”

Again, we nodded. We had been made well aware of all this during our time at the Royal Academy.

“However,” he continued, “the purge has left Ehrenfest with even fewer nobles, and the rest are now plotting to secure the positions left by those who were imprisoned. We need to prioritize getting our internals in order over changing how we deal with other duchies.”

As he said, the execution of several giebels in such quick succession meant the remaining nobles were now jostling for their titles. It was hardly a good time to

be focused elsewhere.

“We know how hard you kids are working. Even among the chaos of the purge, the three of you managed to unify the dorm and raise our grades and rank even higher than before. However, pathetically enough, we adults can’t keep up with you. That’s why we all want you to hold our current position in the Royal Academy—or even knock us down to tenth.”

My jaw dropped in sheer disbelief. I’d assumed that the adults would do their best to match our new ranking in Yurgenschmidt, but here they were, even humoring the idea of climbing back down a little.

“Is that really what you all want...?” I asked. During our time at the Royal Academy, we had divided ourselves into teams and all worked so hard to improve our duchy’s position. I could still picture the students’ proud smiles after their professors had praised their high grades. And what about our retainers? They had all run themselves ragged, using trial and error to figure out how to properly manage Ehrenfest’s new place among the top-ranking duchies. How could I ask them to cast aside all of their hard work?

“Rozemyne,” Karstedt said from where he was standing behind Sylvester, looking noticeably bitter. “This is the will of your support base—of the Leisegangs.”

“The Leisegangs...?”

“Yes. The purge was carried out early, and almost all of our duchy’s most powerful Ahrensbach-associated nobles were removed from their posts or eliminated. Satisfied that his lifetime rivals had at last met a grisly end, Giebe Leisegang Emeritus climbed the towering stairway to the distant heights.”

My eyes widened. “Great-Grandfather has gone to the distant heights?”

“He was finally at peace, confident in his belief that you were sent from the gods to aid Leisegang. His last request was for you to become aub after his passing.”

I thought back to my last meeting with Giebe Leisegang Emeritus, who had come across as a ball of extreme hatred and resentment toward Ahrensbach and Veronica. My assumption had been that he’d calmed down after speaking

with Wilfried and making that promise, but apparently not. It was pretty disturbing to hear that he'd died of pure glee over the purge, which he'd said was thanks to me, and that even in his dying breath he'd asked for me to rule Ehrenfest.

"Um, Father... what does his passing have to do with our duchy's ranking?" Wilfried asked, confused.

Florencia cast her eyes down a little. "His climb to the distant heights means that we no longer have to oppose the former Veronica faction. Our need to climb the ranks to defeat Ahrensbach has disappeared. From this point forward, we will need to devote ourselves to sorting out our internal matters—and, given the pressure that Ehrenfest is already under, the Leisegangs believe that nobody will rejoice over our rank rising even further."

I'd already known that the adults were struggling to keep up, but it was a surprise to hear them say that *nobody* would appreciate our progress.

Do you mean to say we shouldn't have worked together at the Royal Academy to boost our ranking?

My efforts to improve Ehrenfest's position hadn't been for the sake of the Leisegangs; it was just a good way to unify the dormitory and make sure that Ferdinand wasn't looked down upon in Ahrensbach. But after asking me to help our duchy climb the rankings, Sylvester was telling me to drop it back down to tenth. How was I even supposed to respond to that?

You said that because Ferdinand is in Ahrensbach, serving as a tutor for Lady Letizia, Ehrenfest needs to work hard too. Didn't you?

"This may sound a bit extreme," Sylvester said to me, "but you're the only one who's actively interacting with top-ranking duchies and forming connections with the royal family. The nobles believe that, if you tone things down, our rank will stop going up. In other words, you stood out too much. You're continually coming first-in-class and getting closer with royalty. If you do any more, we're going to face unnecessary conflict over who should become the next aub. We want you to act very carefully from now on."

He was basically saying that it was better for me *not* to work hard. Was that why Ferdinand hadn't praised me this year? Because my achievements had

caused Ehrenfest more trouble than anything? The moment that occurred to me, my excitement about having come first-in-class and the celebration I'd seen from atop the stage started to fade away. The world around me was losing its color.

"The giebess who have spoken with you know that you don't want to become the aub," Sylvester said, "but everyone else seems to think that you do. You have no choice but to prove them wrong."

So... to prevent any weird disputes over who should be the next aub, I need to keep myself out of the spotlight? Would it be better if I weren't here at all?

The pride I took in my duties, my desire to work hard... It felt like these integral parts of me were shriveling up and dying. I wanted to lock myself away in my library so that people would stop complaining about everything I did.

"Well... Good," I said with a smile. "My absence when the factions are shifting and rewards and punishments are being divvied out will surely change their perspective. I entrust getting Ehrenfest in order and controlling the noble population to you and Wilfried, the current and future aubs."

This really was for the best. After all, once I was at my library or the temple—which had the added benefit of being so close to the lower city—I wouldn't have the motivation to do much else.

Wilfried nodded and said, "Right. I'll focus on settling the chaos in the castle and noble society as a whole and get them to recognize me as the next aub in the process." He was accepting his new duty with a dazzling smile.

Do you not think anything about being told that everyone's hard work in the Royal Academy was for nothing? That we've been asked to give up the rank we all worked so hard to secure?

We were both a part of the same conversation, so how was he giving such a hope-filled smile? It was too bizarre to understand, but whatever. I continued to unload all of my burdens.

"I went to the Royal Academy's library and copied out the schematics for the stage and the magic circle used in the spring ritual. The two of you may use them for the sake of your faction."

At this point, I was just getting rid of anything that might get me called back to the castle. But rather than turn his nose up at the extra work, Wilfried rejoiced and thanked me.

“You are both helping me ever so much,” I said. “Now I can focus on the temple and the lower city.” This was a win for us all—or so I thought. Sylvester shook his head at me with a troubled frown.

“No, we want you to take on Florencia’s duties while she’s dealing with her pregnancy.”

He was asking me to start unifying the female nobles while socializing in tea parties and propping up Wilfried as his fiancée. To be honest, I wasn’t crazy about doing any of that. Now that Ferdinand was gone, there was nobody I could consult about temple work, and I really wasn’t sure whether the temple could function with just my retainers. Plus, now that there was no need for me to work hard in the Royal Academy, I didn’t have the slightest bit of motivation to attend any annoying tea parties.

Hmm... Maybe I should make a few very deliberate mistakes to lower our rank.

“I understand why those tasks would normally fall to me—because I am engaged to Wilfried—but Charlotte is much better suited to socializing and administrative work. I would rather focus on my duties as the High Bishop, overseeing the orphanage, and directing the merchants.”

We really couldn’t afford to slack when it came to preparing to host more merchants from other duchies. If we revealed to them that our internals were such a mess right now, our interduchy relations would surely suffer.

Sylvester thought for a moment, then nodded and said, “You’re right.”

Even now, I’ll still work hard for everyone in the lower city.

As I worked on pulling my scattered feelings back together, focusing in particular on my promise with Dad, Wilfried started pouting at Sylvester. “Father, don’t be so lenient with Rozemyne,” he said. “She needs to hurry up and get more socializing experience for next year at the Royal Academy.”

I decided not to say what was really on my mind—“Why the heck should I

bother when I don't need to give two hoots about our ranking?"—and instead gave him a ladylike tilt of my head. "But who will take care of all the temple work and business with the Merchant's Guild if not I? Surely I'm not expected to do everything."

I had only recently been put in charge of the temple work, and our scholars weren't yet capable of understanding the lower-city merchants' intentions. We were so lacking in competent manpower that I wanted to weep openly about having lost Justus. I was the only one who could do this work.

"I can understand you being needed in the temple, but why can't you leave the Merchant's Guild to the scholars?" Wilfried asked. "They dealt with them before, didn't they? Getting more socializing experience is far more important, especially with next year in mind."

It was only because I was actively balancing the needs of the nobles with the realities of the merchants that we were getting by at all. How, then, had he convinced himself that we could entrust things to the old scholars? It was clear as day that they would ignore the commoners' circumstances, make unreasonable demands, and ultimately cause everything to blow up in their faces.

"I wonder, which scholars are you referring to?" I replied. "Surely not the ones who are incapable of adjusting to our new rank and who continue to work with the mindset of a bottom-ranking duchy. Not even Hartmut, who is very skilled at speaking with lower-city commoners, has the knowledge and experience necessary for business discussions. He would struggle to negotiate without me there. So, if we *have* raised scholars whom we can entrust with such matters, this is my first time hearing of them. I would even welcome such unique talent as my retainers."

"W-Well, I mean..." Wilfried stuttered, his eyes wandering around the room. Evidently, there were no such scholars.

As I glared at Wilfried, Charlotte heaved an exasperated sigh. "Wilfried, I understand your wish for Rozemyne to secure more experience, but she makes an excellent point. I can take her place and socialize with other noblewomen, but no one else is equipped to manage the temple and cooperate with

merchants. I will serve as Mother's representative in her stead."

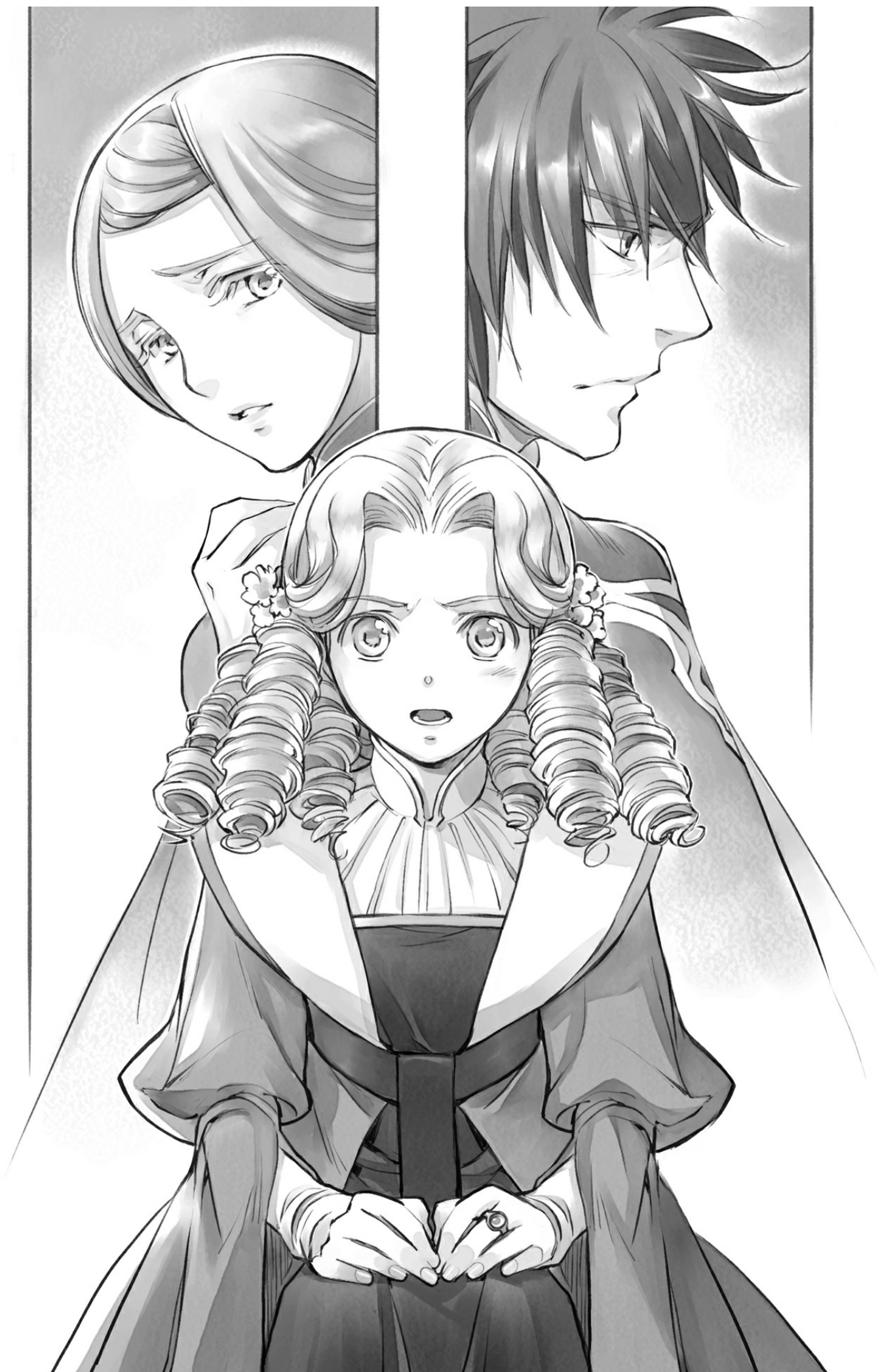
Oh, Charlotte! You're so smart and considerate! To think I was going to hole up in my library and the temple...

She was dazzling and so very reliable. It made me feel a little guilty for not wanting to work hard anymore.

"Charlotte," Florencia said, "getting Rozemyne to socialize more is our highest priority. Even the reports we received made it clear that interacting with other nobles is her greatest weakness at the moment." I could tell that I'd caused her plenty of headaches and immediately averted my eyes, feeling awkward.

In contrast to my own reaction, Charlotte began to grimace. She looked from me to Wilfried to Sylvester to Florencia, then gazed down and said, "Now that Uncle is gone, there is so much more to be done. Temple work; managing the orphanage, which has grown in size due to the purge; negotiating with the merchants; transporting the Gutenbergs; serving as an advisor for the printing industry... There is so much that only Rozemyne can do, and she already has more to balance than most adults, let alone other students. You snubbed her hard work at the Royal Academy, and now you want her to obtain more socializing experience? How will she find the time when you won't even give her any extra manpower? And on top of all that, you expect her to take Mother's place? Every single one of you is in the wrong."

She finally looked up again, her indigo eyes now scathingly critical. "I do not believe for a moment that learning to socialize is Rozemyne's highest priority. Mother, Father—you are both healthy and young enough to be having a new child. We have at least a decade before Rozemyne will need to start serving as the first wife and fulfilling all of the relevant duties."



Charlotte...

I was touched that she would get so angry for my sake. My world seemed to get just a little bit brighter, and I took a moment to relish my newly restored optimism.

Right. I'll continue working hard for just a little bit longer.

But while I was reveling in delight, everyone else was staring at Charlotte in shock. She was being openly critical of not just Wilfried but the archducal couple as well. Still, that did nothing to slow her; with a quiet countenance, she continued expressing her opinions.

“Father, it was clear to you that the purge would put Ehrenfest in very dire straits, yet you continued to refuse a second wife and even impregnated Mother on top of that. If anyone should need to take Mother’s place, it should be us, her blood relatives. I see no reason why Rozemyne should need to pick up the pieces.”

In truth, I did think it was a shame that Sylvester, who had married the woman he loved, was now being asked to take a second wife entirely for political reasons. For his sake, I even hoped it would never come to that. I also had no qualms about him having another baby. The extent of my reaction to that news was “That’s nice.”

Charlotte didn’t share my opinions, however. She was born and raised as a purebred member of the archducal family, so she had an entirely different perspective when it came to second wives. She felt anger and scorn toward our archduke, who had chosen to impregnate his first wife yet again when he was still refusing to take a second.

“Also,” she continued, “how are we going to fulfill our agreement with Groschel when Mother is pregnant? One of my retainers is from Groschel, and, as I understand it, we are due to perform an entwickeln there this spring.”

Entwickelns were large-scale spells with the power to reform an entire city. Casting one required so much mana that the entire archducal family would need to chug rejuvenation potions—and, while the lower city in Groschel was smaller than the one in Ehrenfest, it was still sure to be a costly endeavor. We

had already been one man down now that Ferdinand was in Ahrensbach, but Florencia needing to provide mana for her baby would make the original schedule that much harder to stick to.

Sylvester paused. “Spring might not be feasible anymore, but we could manage in time for autumn.”

“For something on the scale of an *entwickeln*, no mistakes can be permitted. The nobles in Groschel are already on a knife-edge; do you truly expect them to be able to prepare for next summer’s merchants after such a sudden change of plans?” Charlotte asked. Judging by the confidence with which she spoke, she had already discussed the matter with her Groschel retainer.

She continued, still glaring at Sylvester, “I do not wish to see my retainer suffer. Rozemyne, you also have a Groschel noble in your service, do you not? You are also more knowledgeable about merchants and lower cities than anyone else here. Will changing the date of the *entwickeln* truly be acceptable?”

I started racking my brain, desperate to meet my little sister’s expectations. Brunhilde had already told me how things were going in Groschel. I’d even been there before.

They wouldn’t be entirely incapable of preparing...

Groschel had sent its craftspeople to train in Ehrenfest when it was adopting the printing and paper-making industries. It already had connections with the Gutenbergs and, by communicating with the Printing Guild, could prepare shops for books and paper at a moment’s notice. Plus, presumably at Brunhilde’s direction, it had been working with the Gilberta Company to create more stores that dealt primarily in hair ornaments. The problems were that it fundamentally lacked enough inns to support merchants from other duchies, and its lower city was outright filthy. Even after an *entwickeln*, it was unknown whether the people there would manage to keep things clean.

“They have made all the preparations necessary to open their stores,” I said. “The main questions are whether they will be able to establish their inns and keep the city clean. Bear in mind that they will need to sort out furniture and other interior decorations, secure and train personnel... Giving them half a year

less to get everything ready would disturb things enormously.”

Entwickeln could only be used to make plain, white buildings, meaning they wouldn't have furniture, window frames, or even doors at first. That was why the current schedule was for the spell to be cast in spring, the exteriors to be sorted out during summer and autumn, and the furniture to be made over the winter. Postponing the entwickeln to autumn would create all sorts of chaos, and it seemed unreasonable to expect the craftspeople to work outside in all the snow. Under those circumstances, would it even be possible for Groschel to furnish all of the buildings and supply them with trained personnel in time for the following summer? Not likely.

“You believe so too?” Charlotte asked. “Back when my room in the northern building was being prepared, it took us two years to choose the specialist craftspeople we needed and arrange the necessary carpets, curtains, furniture, and so on. It is hard to imagine that performing the entwickeln in autumn will give Groschel enough time to prepare for the merchants coming the following summer.”

Of course, furniture and rooms for commoner merchants wouldn't take anywhere near as long to prepare as furniture and rooms for a member of the archducal family. After my experience with both the monastery and the Italian restaurant, however, I understood that carpentry workshops still needed plenty of time to finish such jobs.

As I was thinking of ways we could save more time, Wilfried peered from Charlotte, who was getting into her stride, to Florencia, who was looking quite unwell. “We still need to change our plans, Charlotte,” he snapped. “The entwickeln requires too much mana for Mother to participate. Do you want to put her in danger?”

“That isn't my intention at all,” she retorted. “I simply fear that Groschel will criticize the archducal family for changing the plan to meet our own needs. Should we not try to avoid provoking them when the duchy is already so unstable from the purge?”

She was right; forcing unreasonable demands on Groschel now, of all times, would inevitably provoke the Leisegang faction. Sylvester's go-to method of

pushing his work onto those below him would only lead us into a classic pitfall.

“Father—if you wish to avoid backlash from Groschel and the Leisegang faction, you must promise not to make any new business deals during the coming Archduke Conference,” Charlotte concluded.

Sylvester and his retainers grimaced; they were sure to be questioned about this year’s business slots and which duchies they would go to. Ehrenfest’s abrupt rise through the rankings meant we wanted to stay in everyone’s good graces, so it was going to be rough having to turn down so many interested parties.

“Charlotte,” Wilfried said, “we need to prioritize interduchy relations over appeasing the Leisengangs. *The royal family* told us to rethink how we deal with other duchies.”

He made a good point. The Leisengangs were Ehrenfest nobles, meaning it was possible to squash their protests using Sylvester’s authority as the archduke, but that solution wouldn’t work on other duchies. It made sense that Wilfried was more conscious of this fact than Charlotte was, since Anastasius had directly warned him about it.

It certainly is scary to think of making enemies out of other duchies as well as the Leisengangs.

In its current state, Ehrenfest needed to satisfy other duchies as well as its own nobles. If this was a negative consequence of our new rank, then perhaps I needed to take responsibility for it.

“I know that keeping our own nobles in order is important,” I said, “but interduchy relations are important too, right?”

“Yes,” Sylvester answered.

“In that case, I think we should focus on making Groschel usable by next summer—though this will require you, the archduke, to take the lead. You cannot simply leave the matter to Giebe Groschel.”

Trying to pass the buck would be disastrous; if everything ended up falling apart, then Groschel would receive all of the blame. Having the archduke be accountable instead was sure to smooth things over.

“What are you saying?!” Sylvester exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“You would have the archduke take responsibility for Groschel...?” Florencia asked, looking equally as surprised.

“I would. We’re borrowing its lower city because our own isn’t large enough to host all the merchants. If the archduke is willing to take responsibility for the preparations, then Charlotte’s fears should be taken care of, no?”

To be more specific, Charlotte was worried that Groschel wouldn’t be able to follow the new, unreasonable schedule and would end up being blamed for the failure, which would cause backlash and further destabilize Ehrenfest.

Charlotte nodded and said that she was also worried about my workload getting too excessive, which was very cute. She then carefully eyed Sylvester, awaiting his response.

“Rozemyne...” Sylvester muttered, wilting beneath the stern, silent look from his daughter.

“If you are going to vastly modify the schedule based on personal circumstances, then you should also be ready to provide your full support. The preparations won’t be completed in time if you leave this to Groschel—but if you provide most of the mana and funding while offering to accept the blame for any failures, we might just be able to manage.”

“Oho? And how is that?” Sylvester asked, clapping a hand on his cheek before leaning forward, intrigued. Now that I had his attention, I decided to launch into my explanation.

“Scholars need to make precise schematics for the entwickeln, correct? In particular, we’ll need diagrams for the inns. If we can get those and work out the precise measurements, we can order the doors, window frames, and other such things well in advance—from *separate* carpentry workshops.”

We had an enormous order on our hands, and exclusivity culture would only slow things down. Though I understood that it was important for the lower-city craftsmen to have regular customers and a steady supply of work, it really got in the way at times like this.

I continued, “Half a year should be enough time for a workshop to complete

the interior decorations for a single room, and if we ask for the doors and window frames to be prioritized, we can have those put in place immediately after the entwicklung. The craftsmen will work even harder if we make them compete with one another and reward those who do the best.”

Getting the doors and window frames made first was key. If we waited until after winter, snow would sweep into all of the newly built houses and create a huge mess, which would only delay things further.

“That said,” I went on, “the workshops in Groschel won’t have enough builders and carpenters to complete everything in time. We’ll also need to send orders to the provinces surrounding it and to our own lower city. That is one of many reasons why I think the aub should take charge.”

Giebe Groschel asking another giebe could turn into a disaster depending on what they wanted in return, but an archducal order would smooth all that over.

“Hmm...” There was a glint in Sylvester’s dark-green eyes, which brought an immediate smile to my face. His expression was that of someone who had just found the path to victory.

“The problem from there is going to be the furniture,” I said. “Just as Charlotte fears, Groschel would need to rely on carpentry workshops, and there simply wouldn’t be enough time for them to prepare furniture for every room. We cannot afford to settle for half measures either; the visiting merchants are going to be some of the wealthiest in all of the top-ranking duchies, and their tastes are bound to be just as rich. But with the aub himself at the helm, that won’t be an issue.”

“How so?”

“You’re responsible for the estates of nobles crushed during the purge, are you not? Simply confiscate their furniture. We’ll already be using a different workshop for each inn, so having a variety of styles shouldn’t be an issue. And think about how much money it will save us.”

It would also save us all the tedious bureaucracy of needing to budget for, acquire, and pass down the furniture.

“Furthermore,” I said, “unlike instruments or magic tools, the furniture taken

from the nobles' estates won't be needed by the children who avoided punishment." They were going to be living in the orphanage, the castle playroom, or somewhere in the dormitories—all places that were already furnished.

I continued, "We'll also need to account for the time it will take to train personnel. If we move the potential inn workers from Groschel to our lower city as soon as possible, they can start getting some hands-on experience."

Coordinating the move wouldn't be easy, but it would give those from Groschel an entire half year of experience doing business with merchants from other duchies. Meanwhile, our lower city would receive extra manpower during such a busy period. It seemed like a beneficial arrangement for both parties.

"It is my duty to make such arrangements with the merchants, so you may leave this to me," I concluded. "Assuming that you'll take responsibility as the aub, that is."

After a short pause, Sylvester said, "Alright. I'll do it."

Florencia looked from her husband to me, concerned, while Wilfried stared down at the floor with pursed lips. Charlotte muttered that, in the end, I'd still ended up having more work thrust upon me.

I cackled a little. "Thank you for worrying about me, Charlotte, but I've been told to stay in the shadows. As such, while these are my suggestions, the aub will be the one actually carrying them out."

Charlotte's eyes widened a little, then she smiled and let out an amused giggle.

Now I can hide away in the temple and get more opportunities to see everyone in the lower city. All according to plan!

It was then that Melchior, who had been listening in silence, suddenly shot his hand up. "Sister, is there anything I can do? I want to be useful to Ehrenfest too."

"Well... Could you assist me then, Melchior?"

"Of course," he replied, smiling brightly. "What do you need me to do?"

To be honest, there wasn't really anything Melchior *could* do. He couldn't provide mana because he hadn't been taught how to control it, and it didn't seem feasible to bring him to religious ceremonies. Still, it was best to encourage his motivation; even if he himself wouldn't be of much use, the retainers with him at all times were another story.

These are people who can take over—I mean, uh, who can assist me with my temple work!

"You can study the details of temple work," I said. "You will need to be ready to serve as the High Bishop by the time I come of age, will you not?"

The purge meant we had even fewer blue priests than before, so preparing my successor was more important than ever. Otherwise, the temple would outright collapse when I came of age and departed with all of my retainers.

Sorting out my successor should also give me more time to spend in my library...

"I will take over training Melchior and his retainers," I declared.

Sylvester grimaced at the very idea and muttered, "That's one way to make me worry about his future..." His reluctance was irrelevant, though. *Somebody* needed to train my successor, and nobody was better suited to the position than I—especially when we were already so shorthanded.

"Lady Rozemyne, would you really send our lord to the temple straight after his baptism?" asked one of the people in Melchior's service. They didn't let it show on their faces, but he and some of his fellow retainers—particularly the older ones—seemed less than pleased with the idea.

"I was made High Bishop immediately after my baptism," I replied, unwilling to let such valuable manpower slip through my fingers. "In my case, I was raised in the temple. I could rely on Lord Ferdinand to help me with my work and train my retainers. But who will provide this support to Melchior? My retainers are unlikely to stay in the temple after I come of age."

I shot Hartmut a glance. He smiled in response, requested permission to speak with Melchior and his retainers, and then said, "Indeed, we should start his training as soon as possible. Lady Rozemyne is the only person whom I will

serve, and my intention is to leave the temple as soon as she does. Only three years remain before Lord Melchior is due to become the High Bishop. Are you all prepared to support him then?”

Melchior recoiled and stared up at his retainers. “Three years...” he muttered, then turned to Sylvester and said, “Father, I want to help my sister in the temple. There’s nothing I can do here in the castle, but I’m an archduke candidate too; I want to be of some assistance.”

“Alright,” Sylvester eventually said, caving. “Melchior, I hereby order you and your retainers to help in the temple.”

Melchior’s older retainers grimaced, but the knights seemed quite interested. My mana compression method aside, they had probably heard the students back from the Royal Academy talking about getting divine protections through prayer.

“Let’s work hard together, Melchior.”

“Right!”

From there, our meeting came to a close. Melchior was the only one to stand up with a bright smile; everyone else appeared to be swallowing some very bitter remarks. Sylvester, Florencia, and their retainers looked particularly unwell, likely because of the mountain of work that awaited them, while Wilfried and Charlotte seemed to be brooding over something.

Bonifatius strode to the door, ignoring the heavy atmosphere entirely. He then stopped, waved to me, and said, “Rozemyne, what you need is some archducal work in the castle. If you want to leave the temple, just ask me for help.”

A stir ran through the room. Sylvester, Florencia, and Wilfried all tensed up. Our meeting was supposed to be over, but now we were getting drawn back into it.

In truth, my mind was already elsewhere; I only had three years before my coming of age, so I was thinking about how to train scholars to do business with merchants and how to plan for Fran’s and my other attendants’ futures. As a result, I responded without even trying to sugarcoat my feelings.

“If you wish to help me, Grandfather, then make it so that I can remain in the temple forever, even after coming of age.”

Sylvester and the others loosened up at once, while Bonifatius went rigid with shock. I cocked my head at him, unsure why he was so surprised, but he simply took his leave with a somewhat saddened expression.

Melchior and Preparing for the Temple

“Rozemyne, what can I expect now that I’m helping out in the temple?” Melchior asked the instant we left the meeting room and started making our way back to the northern building. His indigo eyes sparkling with excitement for his new job, and it brought me peace to see him so motivated.

“Your life in the castle will stay mostly the same,” I replied, “but you’ll be working at the temple between third and fifth bells. Traveling on your retainers’ highbeasts should make the commute much easier. As for your tasks, you can memorize words of prayer in the High Priest’s chambers and offer up your mana. You won’t be able to participate in this year’s Spring Prayer, since you haven’t yet learned to control your mana, but if you start practicing now, then you might be able to help with the Harvest Festival in autumn.”

“Right!”

The plan had always been for Melchior to practice Mana Replenishment with Bonifatius during the spring Archduke Conference, then participate in the Harvest Festival. In other words, the only difference here was that he would memorize prayers in the temple instead of the castle.

“You’re going to be working to your existing schedule for the most part,” I noted, “but it really is important that you come to the temple and offer your mana to the gods.”

Hoping to make Melchior’s older retainers more receptive to sending their lord off to the temple, I started to explain how one obtained more divine protections at the Royal Academy depending on how often one prayed and the amount of mana one offered to the gods. This was now common knowledge among the students, but I wasn’t sure whether it had reached the older generations.

“Through our joint research with Dunkelfelger, we demonstrated that people who pray regularly and offer up lots of mana receive more divine protections,” I said. “Drewanchel seems to have begun looking into the most efficient way to

obtain protections, and our plan for next year is to research religious ceremonies and harvests with Frenbeltaag. These developments, coupled with the royal family's participation in the Dedication Ritual we held at the Royal Academy, have brought a lot more attention to the temple and religious ceremonies. Ehrenfest knows more about these things than any other duchy, and my hope is that we'll start taking more pride in that fact."

"Oho...?"

The older retainers' expressions changed. As expected, being stuck in the northern building due to the purge meant they hadn't known much of what was happening outside. It probably hadn't helped that most of Melchior's student retainers were from lower grades, specifically so that they could continue serving him after he himself enrolled.

I did my best to shill the value of the temple so that Melchior's retainers would be more open to their lord going there. I wanted to make them more cooperative and improve their attitude toward the gray priests, which would make them easier to deal with.

"Melchior, do you know that Wilfried was gifted divine protections from *twelve* gods?" I asked. "That was because he, unlike other archduke candidates, participated in Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival."

"Yes," he replied. "Mother found out from one of your reports and told me over dinner. Father said that you earned even more protections, Rozemyne. They told me to work hard so that I could earn plenty like you."

Wait, what? Like me?

That gave me pause. His phrasing seemed to suggest that the archducal couple was *pleased* about my divine protections, but they had said the complete opposite during our meeting.

"If I participate in religious ceremonies like you and Wilfried do, will I be able to obtain divine protections too?" he asked.

"Indeed. Performing duties in the temple will also help. I intend to look into whether those who have already done the ritual can perform it again here in Ehrenfest." My retainers were all praying in preparation for this.

At once, the guard knights of the other archduke candidates all perked up. “The divine protections ritual can be repeated?!” they asked.

Melchior’s retainer nodded and said, “We have been told that the graduating students who participated in our joint research were given a second chance.” It seemed that they were aware that some graduates, such as Leonore and Lieseleta, had managed to get extra protections.

“We haven’t yet done any experiments,” I said, “so I am unsure whether we will see any success, but I plan to begin my research with my adult retainers. Obtaining many divine protections improves the efficiency of one’s mana, so it should benefit even those who have finished their growth period and struggle to increase their mana through compression.”

This topic wasn’t of much interest to Melchior, who still had mana compression and a growth period ahead of him, but it was captivating his adult retainers. They were older than Cornelius’s generation, and their growth periods had already come and gone by the time my compression method was first being spread. Of course, they would still receive *some* benefit from my method, but the younger generations were already ahead. The older adults had presumably been worried that this new revelation about divine protections would make the chasm even wider, but their eyes now gleamed at the thought of getting to repeat the ritual.

I continued, “But even if you do repeat the ritual, you will not receive any new protections unless you pray to the gods and offer your mana. My retainers do this already and are unlikely to encounter any issues as a result, but the same cannot be said for those who have done nothing of the sort.”

Without missing a beat, Melchior’s retainers began appealing to their lord.

“Lord Melchior, do bring me with you to the temple.”

“No, no. By all means, bring me...”

It was good to see them so eager to go to the temple. Even those serving Wilfried and Charlotte were listening with great interest.

I gave a satisfied nod, then suggested that Melchior’s retainers come up with a rotating schedule. No matter how much they all wanted to go to the temple,

the guard knights also needed to train with the Knight's Order. They would need to take turns.

"Lady Rozemyne, how do your retainers do it?" they asked—and, while Cornelius began to explain, Hartmut smiled at me.

"Lady Rozemyne," he said, "I understand your need to convey the importance of visiting the temple, but there are other arrangements we must mention. I was able to use the High Priest's chambers as they were when I took over from Lord Ferdinand, but Lord Melchior will need to make some additional preparations before he can enter the temple."

"Would you care to elaborate?" Melchior's attendant asked. Melchior was also looking at us, especially curious.

I'd simply inherited the orphanage director's chambers, and all of the preparations for my room had been made while I was being baptized in the Noble's Quarter. Now that I thought about it, though, preparing an entire room really was a huge endeavor.

I mused, "Blue priests from laynoble and mednoble families should have some leftover furniture in the temple, and we could use that to prepare a room at once... However, I was made to order brand-new furniture when I was adopted, so I doubt Melchior, a fellow archduke candidate, would be able to use hand-me-down stuff either..."

"Is the plan for Lord Melchior to visit the temple immediately after the feast celebrating spring?" the attendant asked, worried. There wasn't much time until then.

"Milady, not everything needs to be newly made," Rihyarda informed me. "There is unused furniture in the castle that would be appropriate, so why not send a few pieces to the temple? It would alleviate the problem of some furnishings taking too long to commission from scratch."

Melchior's attendant gave a relieved nod and promptly inquired about what they would need. I visualized the furnishings of my own room.

"He will be eating lunch at the temple, so the kitchen will need to be stocked and new chefs hired," I said. "A closet or some boxes will need to be prepared

to store Melchior's clothing. Also some bookshelves and crates for storing documents. Otherwise, he should only need a bathroom and washroom. He will be studying in the orphanage director's and the High Priest's chambers for some time, so a work desk and such can come later."

The attendant was wearing a serious expression. Saying that Melchior would assist us with temple work was easy enough, but actually preparing a room for him was a lot more complicated. They would need to go through the castle's furniture and pick out pieces for him.

"Rozemyne, will I be able to eat lunch with you at the temple?" Melchior asked.

"Of course," I replied. "Food tastes nowhere near as good when eaten alone. We will need separate chefs, though."

Retainers were given leftovers and could never actually eat with me, so I was genuinely excited about having someone of equal status at the temple. I didn't want him skimping on chefs, though—especially when we had to account for guests, clearly delineate the budget, and send more divine gifts to the orphanage.

"You could ask Sylvester to send one of the court chefs to the temple," I suggested. "A skilled gray shrine maiden could serve as his assistant, or we could ask for a referral from an eatery I know. Blue priests are required to provide the orphanage with leftovers, so their chefs need to make food even when their lord or lady is absent."

Melchior was free to bring one of the chefs he was used to from the castle, but he would need another who could stay in the temple. In that regard, it was better to hire someone new than use a court chef.

I continued, "Ceremonial robes will need to be ordered before the autumn Harvest Festival, and a bed will need to be prepared before winter. Trying to get through the heavy blizzards that occur during the Dedication Ritual to return to the castle is quite a nightmare."

Carriages were out of the question, and riding on a retainer's highbeast still wouldn't do anything to alleviate the bitter cold. It was therefore inevitable that Melchior would need to spend nights at the temple to participate in the

Dedication Ritual. The silver lining was that reusing furniture left behind by the old blue priests and shrine maidens would make it easier to prepare rooms for his retainers.

“This is getting expensive...” Melchior said.

“Indeed,” I replied. “We will need to consult the aub and arrange a budget for the temple. If only we had thought of this earlier, during our meeting.”

“Actually, you’ve timed this well,” Hartmut said. “We need to hold another, more targeted meeting with the aub about the purge having further reduced the number of blue priests in the temple. It was inevitable that some would need to leave due to family circumstances, but there are a number whom we want brought back.”

I was aware that we had fewer blue priests now, but I was surprised to hear that we’d lost enough to impact the running of the temple. Fewer blue priests meant less mana being offered and less food for the orphanage. It also meant more work for those who remained, and more gray priests and shrine maidens returning to the orphanage.

“To be honest with you,” Hartmut continued, “the temple has lost so many blue priests that it now lacks the mana to support Ehrenfest. We could rely on your mana, Lady Rozemyne, but that would make for an abysmal solution in the long term.” He was speaking from his perspective as interim High Priest and always took my future retirement as High Bishop into account.

I nodded. “Dedicating mana to the temple is one of my duties as the High Bishop, but doing that at the expense of supplying the duchy’s foundation is like putting the cart before the horse. The archducal family is meant to support the foundation above all else, so, rather than relying on me, we should prioritize coming up with ways to produce more blue priests and shrine maidens.”

“Lady Rozemyne is correct,” Hartmut said. “I expect more nobles to come to the temple and offer their mana in hope of obtaining more divine protections”—he looked in particular at the retainers who shared that motivation—“but that may not last, depending on the results of our future research.”

As he said, we couldn’t rely on people who would turn their back on the

temple the moment they thought it stopped benefiting them.

“You know, Hartmut... what if we were to treat the children in the playroom as apprentice blue priests? If we use the money confiscated from their parents and get them to live in the noble section rather than the orphanage, they can continue to be treated as noble children, right?”

Hartmut blinked his orange eyes and put a contemplative hand on his chin. He had rejected the idea of taking them into the orphanage before, but now he seemed at least a little bit more receptive.

I continued, “They aren’t even students yet and will need to build up mana for their lessons, so there won’t be much they can offer us. I consider it better than doing nothing at all, though, and it will contribute to hiding them from the searching eyes of other nobles.”

Hartmut began to consider my suggestion even more seriously. The children’s rooms in the castle were already being funded by the money confiscated from their home families and the duchy’s budget, so it didn’t seem like my idea would require much extra cash.

“Like me, they would be both nobles and temple functionaries,” I said, “and a line will surely be drawn connecting them to the pre-baptism children in the orphanage. Above all else, it would be wonderful if we could educate them now and get them to regularly visit the temple to offer their mana.”

Hartmut was likely thinking exclusively about the mana shortage, but it would be a tremendous help to the orphanage to assign them attendants and chefs. Plus, if they were educated in the orphanage, the other kids there would have a clearer goal to work toward.

I continued, “Furthermore, the apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens would get to associate with Melchior when he visits the temple. Would that not make it easier for him to protect them from scorn or unreasonable treatment in the next playroom or at the Royal Academy?” I could pull out all the stops to prevent discrimination while I was a student myself, but we needed something in place for after I graduated. “If the children in the orphanage do not end up being baptized as nobles, then I think this would also be a good way to give them options in the future. Ideally, the blue priests would be able to live even

without support from their houses.”

If we could come up with jobs for the blue priests or some other way they could support themselves, it would potentially open up a way for Dirk and Konrad to live as blue priests. Maybe more children like Konrad would start being entrusted to the temple.

After listening to all of my thoughts, Hartmut smiled. “You seem to have many ideas, but how will you convince the archducal couple to implement them when you were just told not to stand out any more?”

“Hm? I won’t be leaving the temple, so I shouldn’t stand out at all. And as long as I frame all this as a way to reduce the burden on Florencia, I am sure the archducal couple will accept.” But as I clenched my fists in determination, Charlotte, who had spent our journey thus far staring at her feet, looked up. Were those tears in her eyes?

“Sister...” she murmured. “As I said during the meeting, I do not believe you should increase your workload any further.”

“Thank you for worrying about me, Charlotte,” I said with a smile, “but replacing the blue priests we have lost, increasing the amount of workable mana in the temple, and providing a future for the children of the orphanage are my duties as the High Bishop. Also, remember that you’re going to be supporting Florencia. If we can save her even one job, we’ll be helping you in turn.”

“But I want to help *you*...” she replied. It was very cute.

“In that case, come visit the temple,” I said, offering a piece of very stealthy advice. “If you do, I am sure you will receive more divine protections next year.”

She smiled a bit.

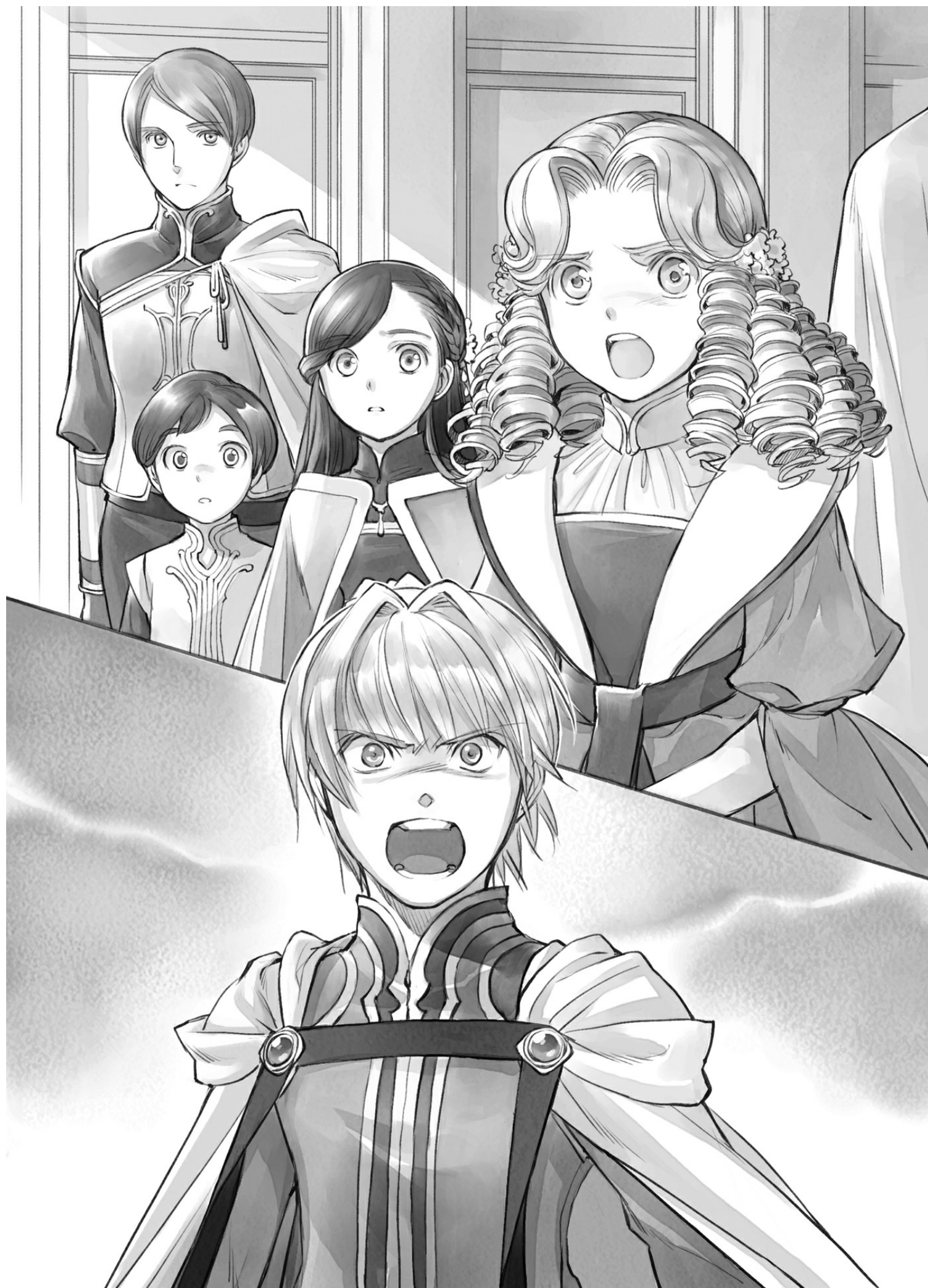
“I intend to hole up in the temple, but I wonder... If I present this as my way of raising our duchy’s next generation of nobles, will people view me more favorably as the next first wife?”

Charlotte cast her eyes down again, her lip trembling. “How can you be so positive after being told such cruel things, Sister? And why are you still coming up with ways to help Mother?”

Because I want to spend all of my time between my library and the temple.

That was my resolve, but Charlotte seemed completely dissatisfied with the outcome of our meeting. She glared at Wilfried, her brow tightly knit, and said, “Brother, how could you agree with Father so readily? Do you think nothing of us being told to lower Ehrenfest’s rank?” It seemed that I wasn’t the only one who had found his lack of a reaction strange.

Wilfried glared back at Charlotte, then glared at Melchior and me as well. “I hate it!” he exclaimed. “Of course I do! Father and I both—”



He bit his tongue, then more calmly retorted, “I just understand that there are things we need to prioritize more.” And with that, he marched on ahead and returned to his room.

Charlotte sighed and shook her head. “I have no idea what he and Father are hiding, but I cannot agree with them, even if this really is the will of the Leisegangs. What are we supposed to say to everyone who has been working so hard at the Royal Academy?”

Wait... My resolve to hide away had cooled my head a little, but now there was something nagging me. *“The will of the Leisegangs”?*

“Father’s stance during that meeting was nothing like what he said to us at the Ehrenfest Dormitory and to Dunkelfelger and the royal family during the Interduchy Tournament. He encouraged us! I do not know how I can continue to believe in him...”

She’s right... This doesn’t add up at all.

It was the same feeling of dissonance as when I’d spoken with Melchior about divine protections. Sylvester’s actions were inconsistent and completely messed up. Something had surely happened between our return from the Royal Academy and that meeting.

“Charlotte,” I said, “it may be too soon to lose faith in him.”

“Sister?”

“We’re missing something... An important detail.”

Let’s raise our rank and make something happen, yeah?

Let’s teach everyone to act the way nobles from a top-ranking duchy should.

Let’s use the purge to get rid of all the dangerous people and unite Ehrenfest.

The Sylvester of the past was always saying things to push us forward. He was always ambitious and ready for change... but not the man I just met. It was like the Sylvester at the meeting was an entirely different person from the Sylvester we knew. And as for Wilfried, he had been the very best when it came to unifying the students in the dormitory and urging them forward. He had worked hard to lead them and rejoiced when they succeeded. I didn’t want to believe

that his excitement back then had all been for show.

““The will of the Leisegangs,”” I repeated. “I think that phrase is the key to all this.”

Charlotte watched me closely. Her indigo eyes were desperately begging me to prove that those merciless, soul-crushing words hadn’t come from her own family.

“Let us go to our rooms and see what the Leisegangs have to say about this,” I said, but Charlotte shook her head.

“I am afraid we cannot invite Giebe Leisegang to the northern building.”

“We don’t need to—not when we have Leisegangs right here with us,” I replied, then looked up at Hartmut and Cornelius, who had attended the meeting with us. They were both adults, and neither one of them had attended the Royal Academy this term. Even if they had been busy sorting out the temple’s Dedication Ritual, I was sure they had participated in winter socializing to at least some degree.

I continued, “I will gather all of my Leisegang retainers to discuss this matter. I want to know what they think of the aub’s reference to their wishes. Do the students agree? Were my adult retainers already aware?”

Hartmut smiled at me and said, “Then let us hurry to your room.” The look on his face seemed to say, “I was waiting for you to notice,” which proved to me that there was more to all this than met the eye. “Leisegang awaits to see what decision you will make.”

The Will of the Leisegangs

Upon returning to my room, I summoned the Leisegang retainers who had been waiting in my chambers, unable to attend the archducal family meeting. Rihyarda, Ottilie, Angelica, Hartmut, Cornelius, Leonore, and Brunhilde were all present. I started by explaining what we had discussed with Sylvester and the others, then asked my question.

“Was the aub correct in saying this was all the will of the Leisegangs?”

Leonore and Brunhilde, who had spent the winter attending the Royal Academy with me, immediately went pale.

“I would rather he not phrase it as if we were all in agreement,” Leonore said flatly, making her displeasure clear. “At no point was I consulted about this matter.”

Brunhilde’s expression grew clouded, like she was searching for the right words. “I was not consulted either, so this certainly was not the will of *all* of the Leisegangs. Perhaps it could instead be described as the will of those from the generation before our duchy’s climb through the rankings. I have heard voices of discontent about how our adults are struggling to keep up with our rank, and many have said that the culture among us students is diverging more and more from that of our forebears.”

Incidentally, the belief that I was better suited to being the next aub than Wilfried had remained strong within the Leisegangs this entire time. My visits to the temple and overall poor health had sown seeds of doubt, but now that I was recovering and our joint research had proven the importance of religious ceremonies, the voices in support of me were growing louder.

“I see,” I replied. “Rihyarda, did you know about this in advance of our meeting?”

She gave me a thin smile, her hands balled into trembling fists. “Had I, I would not have found myself grappling with the sudden urge to scold Lord Sylvester

then and there. So what if this is the will of the Leisegangs? That our own aub is acting as an ordonnanz for giebes is pathetic.”

Rihyarda had ultimately managed to keep her emotions under control, which I greatly admired—but seeing her so worked up was genuinely scary.

As expected, then... Nobody at the Royal Academy knew about this.

I started scanning the rest of the group. Angelica put a hand on her cheek and gave a troubled smile the very instant my eyes met hers, so I decided not to even bother questioning her.

“Did you know, Cornelius?”

“Lamprecht told me a few things, but my knowledge of the situation is pretty bare-bones. Now that the former Veronica faction’s major powers have been removed, their survival depends almost entirely on Lord Wilfried and his retainers. The Leisegangs have the upper hand, however, and will only support him becoming the next archduke if all of their demands are met.”

So, Wilfried was carrying out secret instructions to prove that he was fit to be the next aub. He was keeping them very close to his chest and wasn’t relying on anyone else.

“Lamprecht asked me to help in any way I could, without letting the Leisegangs find out,” Cornelius went on, wearing a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “But after our meeting... I think I would rather sit back and see whether Lord Wilfried wins the Leisegangs over by himself. How can I possibly be of any use to him when he won’t even explain his situation to us? Besides, the stage schematics that you’ve offered are more than enough.”

In conclusion, he thought that Wilfried needed no further support whatsoever.

“Ottilie, you were here in the castle the entire time, weren’t you?” I asked. “Did you hear anything?”

“I received many a question from Leisegang nobles,” she replied. “They wished to know your interests, the times you have grown emotional, what you hold dear, what you protect, the people you have cut off... They were really quite thorough. I told them that you treasure those close to you and practice

meritocracy.”

“But how did that lead to their request for our rank to be lowered...?” I asked, not understanding the connection at all.

Ottilie looked at me as quizzically as I was looking at her. “I found it curious as well. As I understand it, Lady Elvira and the others were also accosted quite often, and they found it all very troublesome.” She was Elvira’s friend and a fellow member of the Florencia faction, so she had presumably been told all of this during tea parties.

She continued, “Lady Florencia’s pregnancy is still not known to the majority of nobles, which is precisely why so many noblewomen are calling for you to associate with her more. The duchy is already in a state of chaos, and they wish for you to prioritize female socializing if you intend to become our first wife.”

“Well, unfortunately...”

I had wanted to say that I didn’t have the time, but Ottilie nodded and cut me off. “Lady Elvira and I are well aware. She said that, with Lord Ferdinand gone, you have more work in the temple and with the printing industry and therefore do not have the time for socializing. I regret to inform you that this excuse was not enough; the firm response was that you should be dedicated to the work of women instead of taking that of men.”

It was because of my accomplishments in the temple and the Royal Academy and my decision to abandon female socializing that everyone seemed to assume I was aiming to become the next aub. They thought that I was bringing attention to myself while at the same time making zero effort to prop up Wilfried as his first wife.

Mm... To be fair, they’re not wrong.

Anytime I was focused on the printing industry and doing business with the merchants of other duchies, or mobilizing the Gutenbergs, or working hard as part of the Better Grades Committee, my only aim was to succeed. I was so focused on profits and efficiency that trying to make Wilfried look good or keeping my head down as his future first wife never even occurred to me. It certainly hadn’t helped that Lutz, Benno, Ferdinand, and Sylvester hadn’t ever urged me to consider such things.

Although I now understood why it was important for me to stand down, it was too late for me to leave the work of repairing a fractured duchy to the boys. I didn't know which duties to give up or when, nor was there anyone who could take my place.

In other words... I'm not very well suited to being Wilfried's first wife, huh? Though I suppose I wouldn't be well suited to being anyone's first wife, considering my complete lack of interest in romance and marriage.

"Lady Elvira often said that Ehrenfest would not be able to function without Lord Ferdinand," Ottilie remarked. "I believe she was correct. There is no one to give a clear and grounded explanation for the aub's decisions, create environments in which you can effectively socialize, or confirm and manage all of our intentions."

Even if we were all operating individually, Ferdinand would have found a way to unify us and make things work. Now that he was gone, however, Ottilie was convinced that everything was falling apart.

"Were he here now," she continued, "he would have arranged a meeting for you and the aub to confirm one another's intentions. That no such thing occurred is because—"

"Pardon me, Mother," Hartmut interjected. "That particular detail has nothing to do with Lord Ferdinand. I think you will find that the Leisegangs are the ones responsible."

I turned to look at him, and immediately he smiled at me. He looked so bright and casual that I couldn't help being suspicious.

"Hartmut," I said, my eyes narrowed, "you knew what the aub was going to say during today's meeting, didn't you? Or rather, what he had been told to say."

"What makes you think that?" he asked in response. There was a gleeful sparkle in his eye that told me I was correct.

"Your eyes," I said to him. "Anytime someone disrespects me—whether they be a blue priest, from a top-ranking duchy, or a member of the royal family—you always give them this very scary look."

What made those occasions doubly scary was that he would maintain a casual smile the entire time. But not once during or after our meeting had he gotten that look in his eye, even though Rihyarda was angrily clenching her fists.

Hartmut broke into a grin, then knelt before me with a very severe look on his face. “O my revered Lady Rozemyne. There is no need for you to tolerate an aub who would speak so cruelly, nor his son who follows in his footsteps. Just as you now lead those at the Royal Academy under one banner, you must seek to unify Ehrenfest, bringing even Leisegang into your fold. The students whom you have protected so carefully are waiting for you to rise up and take your rightful place as our future aub.”

His tone was dry but also strangely performative. It was clear that he didn’t really believe what he was saying.

“Did the Leisegang faction tell you to rile me up after the meeting?” I asked.

“That is correct. The Leisegangs’ desire is to eliminate all traces of Lady Veronica’s influence, and not a drop of her blood flows through your veins. They believe that now is their best chance to make you the next aub, as Aub Ehrenfest has just cast aside his support base in full.”

The purge had been carried out to protect Ehrenfest, but it was important to remember that over half of the aub’s supporters had been of the former Veronica faction. Many of his own retainers had been punished, even. Hartmut said that Sylvester had cleansed the duchy’s rot so thoroughly that he had destroyed his own footing in the process.

Those who had given their names to Georgine were executed, those who had committed crimes to earn Veronica’s favor were punished, and the former Veronica faction was effectively destroyed in one fell swoop. Now, the only members of the faction with any influence were the aub and his children—but the hard-liners of the Leisegang faction were too fixated on their old wounds to support even them.

“The Leisegangs would have accepted things as they are now if all of the remaining archduke candidates were related to Lady Veronica,” Hartmut continued, “but there is you, Lady Rozemyne.”

Indeed, I was an exception. Particularly because of my ties to Karstedt’s

mother and Bonifatius, I was part of an archducal branch family rich with Leisegang blood.

Though I'm actually a commoner from the lower city who was born with the Devouring.

"In addition to your bloodline," Hartmut said, "you came first-in-class three years in a row, have deep connections to top-ranking duchies, and socialize with the royal family. You have also brought new industries to Ehrenfest and started new trends. 'Lady Rozemyne, the famous Saint of Ehrenfest, is best suited to becoming the next aub!' the Leisengangs proclaim. And they are correct."

Mm... Is it just me, or are Hartmut's exaggerated reports making the Leisegang faction hold me in even higher regard...? It must be my imagination.

"But I thought I made it clear to Giebes Leisegang, Groschel, and Haldenzel that I have no intention of becoming the next aub..." I muttered.

"Yes, the top members of the Leisegang faction are aware of this, but the purge has provided too great an opportunity. You must also consider your great-grandfather's dying wish and the efforts of your grandfather, Lord Bonifatius."

"Grandfather...?"

That reminded me—Bonifatius had said something strange at the end of our meeting. I'd never expected it when he was supposed to be supporting the archduke.

Hartmut nodded. "It seems that Lord Bonifatius does not look kindly upon you visiting the temple."

As it turned out, Bonifatius had said, "Rozemyne is clearly the most competent of all the archduke candidates, so why is she being relegated to the temple? I understand that the work there needs to be done, but if the duty must fall to an archduke candidate, send Charlotte or the already disgraced Wilfried instead." He was trying to "save" me from the temple, arguing that there was no need for me to do jobs that would have me belittled in the Royal Academy or the Sovereignty.

"If you can't make Wilfried the High Bishop because he is already the next

aub, then make Rozemyne the next aub instead,” he had apparently continued. “She has the largest support base and the skills required for the position.”

But I want to spend as much time at the temple as I can...

“In short,” Hartmut said, “there is much at play here. Those with Bonifatius hope to make you the next aub to save you from the temple. The hard-liners wish to purge every drop of Lady Veronica’s blood from Ehrenfest, while those in the mainstream just want an aub with a familial connection to the Leisegangs, if possible. Those who are less motivated will support your claim to the archducal seat only if you desire it, while the more meritocratic feel that the role should go to whomever has the most mana. All these varying opinions can hardly be considered unified... but if one were to take a more holistic approach, the will of the Leisegangs would certainly be for you to become the next aub.”

Some of the Leisegangs would apparently cooperate with raising our duchy’s rank for the sake of an aub with their blood, but absolutely not for one related to Veronica.

“That sounds like a very disparate consensus...” I noted. “Surely a light prod would be enough to make their ‘collective wish’ shatter into pieces.”

“The bonds connecting them may seem weak now, but that isn’t how they appear from the outside. Plus, with their own faction having been purged, there are almost no nobles remaining who support the aub and Lord Wilfried. The will of the Leisegangs surely feels much greater than it really is.”

As he said, there were barely any nobles left who supported Sylvester and Wilfried. The only ones who came to mind were their retainers, those who were against me becoming the aub and our current momentum being maintained, those who wanted Ehrenfest to stay as they knew it, and those who were too old to receive new divine protections and my mana compression method and were annoyed about the younger generation overtaking them. Nobles from the former Veronica faction who had avoided punishment were supporting Wilfried too, apparently.

“That said,” Hartmut added, “the Leisegangs were faced with a dilemma: How were they to make you the next aub when you have no interest in the position? The solution they came up with was to pit you against the rest of the archducal

family and ultimately have you isolated. They made arrangements for you to lose your faith in the aub, hoping to compel you to rise up to protect your faction. That was when they approached Lord Bonifatius and pleaded for his aid in freeing you from the temple.”

Bonifatius’s main concern was getting me out of the temple. Although he truly believed that I would make a better aub, he understood the many trials and tribulations that a ruling archduchess faced and was happy for me to become a first wife instead. That meant I would need to receive a proper education, though, with Florencia guiding me instead of merely leaving me in the temple.

So that’s why Florencia was pushing for me to socialize...

Hartmut continued, “Leisegang nobles told Lord Bonifatius that, as the rumors suppose, you have been forced into a position wherein you cannot speak your honest thoughts. They asked him to keep watch so that the aub does not discreetly force your hand, and he agreed. He also said that he would confirm your intentions.”

It was due to Bonifatius keeping such a close eye on things that Sylvester hadn’t been able to invite me to a pre-meeting to discuss the topics that would come up during our meeting with the whole family.

“Naturally, they made various advances toward the aub himself, laying foundations for their own moves. He could not tell me the details, as I am your retainer, but I did learn that the Leisegangs were using their support as bait to engineer a falling-out within the archducal family. I can only assume that the aub’s hands were tied—not only because he has lost his support base but also because of the weakness created by Lady Florencia’s pregnancy.”

Much like Bonifatius, Hartmut had been assigned an observational role. His task was to see whether Wilfried and the archducal couple actually swallowed the Leisegangs’ demands without calling me for a meeting or making any unreasonable requests of their own.

“As your retainer, I was also asked to confirm your aims. Of course, if you wished to become the next aub, I would ensure that it happened without the assistance of the Leisegangs... but I am well aware that is not the case.”

“Indeed,” I replied, then fixed Hartmut with a stern glare. “But why did you keep all this a secret from me?”

He teasingly raised an eyebrow at me and said, “There were many things that I wished to confirm. What preparations did the Leisegangs make now that the former Veronica faction is out of the picture? How would Lord Wilfried and the archducal couple maneuver them? How would you view the archducal family afterward? And so on.”

Hartmut had spent the entire meeting standing behind me and quietly observing. What had he thought of the proceedings, and what conclusions had he drawn from them? But as I was pondering these things, Brunhilde gave a profound grimace.

“How pitiful of the Leisegangs, when Ehrenfest needs to unify and prepare to face other duchies. In the face of this extortion, is Groschel still asking the archducal family to perform its *entwickeln*?” She shook her head. “I never thought the day would come when I would be ashamed to be a Leisegang.”

“You sure are fastidious, Brunhilde,” Hartmut said with a smile. “Though they were constantly fighting for power, both the Veronica and the Leisegang factions have always been Ehrenfest nobles at heart. It is far from unusual that they would think in the same way. Their main concerns are protecting their own status and lifestyle; they do not care about raising our duchy’s rank or matching the archducal family’s efforts to keep up with our new status. You’ve spent so much time gazing skyward that you’re now blind to everything around you, much like Lady Rozemyne.”

Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?

“In that case, Hartmut, what in the world are *you* seeing?” Brunhilde asked. “And what are you thinking?”

“I only ever think of granting Lady Rozemyne’s wishes, but if you would allow me to voice a more personal desire...” He trailed off, then a menacing smile spread across his lips. It was the same face that Ferdinand made whenever he was plotting. “At this point, Lady Rozemyne has gone far beyond being a mere saint. She is grand enough to be called a genuine goddess, yet these worthless giebess think she would want to rule their equally worthless duchy? I wish for

nothing more than to crush them into dust and scatter them to the wind.”

Holy... Isn't that a bit extreme?!

As we all watched in shock, our mouths hanging open, Hartmut continued his eloquent speech. “Lady Rozemyne desires books, as well as the printing and paper-making industries required to create them. Yes, such things are currently spreading throughout the Leisegangs’ provinces, but that is purely because they were given priority as family. Do not forget that *Illgner* was the first province to create its own workshops.”

He was right—the printing industry wasn’t at all reliant on the Leisegangs. I had only prioritized sending Gutenbergs to their provinces because everyone had said that I should reward the faction supporting me.

Hartmut persisted, “Because the aub has cut down his support base once again, he requires the support and cooperation of the Leisegangs, now the largest of our duchy’s factions, to unify Ehrenfest. You, however, do not require their support at all.”

“I wouldn’t go that far...” I replied, losing confidence in his argument. “I’ll still need them a little bit, right?” I tried to find some reassurance in the room, but my Leisegang retainers were all deep in thought. Even Angelica looked contemplative, though I could tell it was just an act.

“There is no longer any need for the Leisegangs,” Hartmut concluded. “At this point, even nobles of other duchies are attempting to adopt the printing industry—and, as you wish to spread printing all throughout the country and produce countless new books, Lady Rozemyne, we should start focusing beyond our duchy’s borders instead of messing around with this Leisegang farce.”

Leonore nodded and said, “Hartmut is correct. Lady Rozemyne does not require the Leisegangs’ support whatsoever.” She actually looked quite impressed with Hartmut, and, while that wasn’t what I’d wanted, I couldn’t really blame her; I was impressed too. As he had said, my only desires were to spread printing and completely fill the world with books. His grasp on the situation was so good that it was scary.

“Foolishly enough, the Leisegangs believe that being Lady Rozemyne’s family and greatest supporters means they can control her. They are sorely mistaken.

Those old simpletons are completely oblivious to their current standing.”

“Indeed. Trying to direct Lady Rozemyne was a grueling and almost impossible task even for Lord Ferdinand.”

Nuh-uh. That's not true. Ferdinand had me in the palm of his hand.

I wanted to protest, but Brunhilde then added that even attending tea parties with me was exhausting. Instead, I pursed my lips and averted my eyes.

“The Leisegangs’ conspiratorial nature did not change when Lady Veronica came into power, and it persists even now that they have regained dominance,” Hartmut said. “Plus, because they were raised as Ehrenfest nobles, Lord Wilfried and the aub will be highly susceptible to these old methods.”

This meant they would be more likely to fall for the Leisegangs’ plots. They wouldn’t think twice about manipulating others either.

“However,” Hartmut continued, “they fundamentally cannot understand that Lady Rozemyne wishes to be in the temple, or that she would be most happy staying in a library for the rest of her days.”

Hartmut says that, but he was raised to follow the same culture too, wasn't he? How has he managed to transcend it? That's what scares me...

“I considered it a good thing that our archducal family was so close and got along better than perhaps any other in Yurgenschmidt,” he said. “I wish to treasure the atmosphere that allows you to smile, Lady Rozemyne. The last thing I want is for a mistake to rupture your connection, isolate anyone, or have you oppose one another.”

“But that’s what ended up happening...” I muttered. After sitting through the meeting and witnessing Wilfried and Charlotte’s exchange after, it was hard to imagine things ever going as smoothly as they had in the past.

“It need only be mended,” Hartmut replied. “A group at odds with itself can easily be united through the introduction of a common enemy. That was the technique you employed at the Royal Academy, was it not?”

To unify the former Veronica faction and the rest of the Ehrenfest students, I had gotten everyone to focus on beating other duchies. Hartmut was saying

that we should take a similar approach to bring the archducal family back together.

“As our duchy’s breadbasket,” he continued, “Leisegang cares not about interduchy relations or our position within Yurgenschmidt. That is why its people have no qualms about telling us to lower our rank. The elderly have never experienced the advantages that come with our higher position, nor have they witnessed the way it affects how other duchies treat us. They do not understand how we feel as we work to raise our duchy’s rank.”

As the younger generation, we had so much to gain from stronger relations with other duchies: friendships, new marriage prospects, better treatment, ease of gathering intelligence... Hartmut listed all of the advantages, then said that he wasn’t about to abandon them for the sake of the elderly’s lame demands.

“Though they cannot admit it here in Ehrenfest, in front of the adults, there are many among the younger generation who wish to overturn this so-called ‘will of the Leisegangs,’” Hartmut said. “Should we not gather them into a new support base for the aub, who similarly wishes to change the duchy? Our enemy should not be one faction or another; instead, we should oppose the old fools who do not want Ehrenfest to grow.”

Hearing his firmly spoken argument, I tried to gauge the reactions of my other retainers. They were all Leisegangs, but they seemed more than willing to oppose the apparent will of their faction. Had they been corrupted while serving me and working to raise our duchy’s rank?

Leonore added, “We can see from Lord Melchior’s retainers as well as the students of the former Veronica faction with whom you interacted at the Royal Academy that there is great interest in obtaining new divine protections. You shouldn’t have any trouble bringing the younger generation together, and you might even be able to win over enough people to create a faction.”

She then adopted a very calculating expression, coldly tallying the number of people who had received my mana compression method and all the laynobles who had expressed an interest in learning it. Even though she was suggesting we oppose her own parents’ generation, she didn’t seem the slightest bit

hesitant.

On instinct, I turned to Cornelius.

He gave me an amused grin and said, “You know, Rozemyne... I do have an idea—if you don’t mind me speaking as your elder brother for a moment. Leisegang takes great pride in being the duchy’s breadbasket, right? Then why don’t we embrace that? We’ll always need people who can produce food through traditional methods, and if we respectfully emphasize that fact, I’m sure we can satisfy them.”

The fact of the matter was that the Leisegangs *were* my supporters. Cornelius’s approach would allow us to elevate them instead of cutting them off, while simultaneously relegating the conservative, change-opposing adults to their backwater provinces. He seemed to be in agreement with Hartmut.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Ottilie interjected, “if you have no desire to become the next aub, then I would advise you to leave gathering the younger generation and creating a faction to Lord Wilfried. Give him the suggestion and then withdraw. You are busy with the temple and do not need to involve yourself with the work of men.”

In essence, it would be unwise for me to ignore the calls of the noblewomen.

“Mother is correct,” Hartmut added. “As you do not require the support of a faction, there is no need for you to make one.”

“Hartmut?” I said.

“Propose the idea to Lord Wilfried and then let him take care of the rest. He will consider it his duty as the next archduke and work hard to complete it. If that proves too much for him, even with that silver spoon so firmly in his mouth, then he truly is irredeemably incompetent.”

I decided it was probably best to ignore that last line. Hartmut was a bit of an extremist, but he was still technically thinking of ways to prop up Wilfried and unify Ehrenfest. His harshness surely came from his high expectations.

“Let us end these troublesome matters at once and return to the temple as soon as possible,” he concluded. “I am tremendously eager to repeat the ritual for obtaining divine protections. As anyone should realize, succeeding with

religious matters is infinitely more important for the saintly Lady Rozemyne.”

At last, his true motivation comes to light!

Now that I understood what was really driving Hartmut, all of my nerves seemed to melt away. There was no point in dwelling on the matter any further; I would make the faction suggestion so that the archducal family could start healing and advocate that Sylvester acquire a new support base after casting aside his old one for the sake of the duchy.

“Well, then—let us gather together the motivated and ambitious youths and cause a generational shift in Ehrenfest.”

Speaking with the Aub

After getting Rihyarda to deliver my request for a meeting with Sylvester, I reunited with Charlotte, who had presumably been asking her own retainers about the will of the Leisegangs. She explained that she hadn't actually learned much from them—she had considerably fewer Leisegangs in her service than I did in mine, so that was probably why—but she *had* received a lot of very important information from Florencia's retinue. As it turned out, extremist nobles were actually hoping to assassinate Wilfried, believing that the best way to make me Ehrenfest's next aub was to remove him from the picture entirely.

In response, I mentioned that the Leisegangs were giving Sylvester and Wilfried secret demands to complete. This made Charlotte look very worried.

"Is it possible that the Leisegangs are tricking them?" she asked.

Well, it does seem more suspicious alongside that claim of them wanting Wilfried dead. I can't say for sure, though.

"I expect the Leisegangs are pressuring them and making demands they cannot refuse. Thus, I believe the things they said to us during our meeting were not their true opinions."

"It is frustrating that we were not made privy to these details..." Charlotte murmured, apparently feeling left out. "Is it because we are unreliable?"

"No, you are as reliable as can be, Charlotte. Perhaps they chose to keep us in the dark as a way to protect us during these uncertain times."

"Sister...?"

"Were I not the figurehead of the Leisegangs, I imagine Sylvester would not be caught under their thumb and stuck having to lower Ehrenfest's rank at their demand. At the moment, I feel that he is protecting me."

Sylvester obviously knew that Florencia's retainers were feeding Charlotte information. It would have been so easy for him to kill me and put an end to all this chaos—I was a mere commoner, so that was entirely within his power—but

instead he was protecting me and trying to complete the Leisegangs' demands.

"For that reason, I want to help Sylvester in turn," I said, then revealed our plan to speed up the generational shift and create a brand-new faction for Sylvester and Wilfried. "Please assist me with this, Charlotte. It is only an idea for now, but would it not make their position so much more stable?"

"I agree that it would be effective, but... it will be quite some time before the younger generation can operate as Father's faction. On their own, they will not have the influence necessary to restrain the Leisegangs." She was calmly asserting that, while our desire to make use of the chaos was admirable, our actual plan wasn't good enough.

"Furthermore," she continued, "concern about and resistance to the changing climate are not felt exclusively among the adults. Even within the Ehrenfest Dormitory there was opposition to the children of the former Veronica faction being treated on the same level as everyone else, and to the idea that archnobles should earn their own money."

The laynobles and mednobles had accepted my suggestion that those who wished to learn my mana compression method should earn the money themselves, but archnobles who had never done such work before had openly despised the idea. Charlotte had found out about this through her retainers.

"Their resistance waned only as a result of your archnoble retainers leading by example, so we will need to guide them again. We must extend a hand to those who are struggling to keep up with all these dramatic changes."

Charlotte was very talented when it came to reconciling the perspectives of others, so I took her advice to heart. I also asked how we could get everyone to accept the coming revolution.

"Above all else," she replied, "I think Father should take a Leisegang as his second wife."

"Why is that?"

"The Leisegangs have always secured their power through marriage, have they not? By taking an especially progressive member of their faction as his second wife, Father could simultaneously appease the Leisegangs and support

the generational shift. I expect this method would settle things more peacefully than any other”—she cast her eyes down—“but Mother’s pregnancy means it is no longer an option.”

Babies were very sensitive to mana, so Sylvester wouldn’t be able to take a second wife until at least a year after Florencia gave birth. In fact, he would probably end up needing to wait two—while a newborn was mostly dependent on its mother’s mana, the father’s played a role as well. It was all too far down the line to remedy any of the chaos currently affecting the duchy.

Charlotte gave me a self-deprecating smile. “Unlike you, Sister, I am unable to come up with novel ideas; I cannot see beyond the customs of noble culture that have been hammered into me since birth. And since I can provide no better options, I shall do my best to help Father and Wilfried obtain a new faction.”

I spoke with Melchior’s retainers as well, but they couldn’t offer anything that I didn’t already know. Right now, it seemed that I was more knowledgeable about the Leisegangs than anyone.

Melchior’s retainers were most concerned about the temple, and they bombarded me with all sorts of questions. I assured them that I would use my meeting with the aub to secure them a budget as well as permission to move existing furniture to the temple.

I also spoke with those serving Wilfried, but it was a complete waste of time. They offered absolutely nothing in the way of new information, repeating only that their lord was working hard and that I should support him as his fiancée. I responded that, *as his fiancée*, I was going to advise the aub to create a new faction and that I was going to be too busy in the temple to do much else.

The next day, Matthias and the others went with the Knight’s Order to investigate the giebes’ estates. They were aiming to be back before the feast, which meant they didn’t have much time at all. Karstedt hadn’t gone with them—he needed to guard Sylvester—but he had made good on his word and emphasized that the retainers were to be treated well.

“These students gave their names to the archducal family and serve them as retainers,” he had said. “Do not look down on them.”

The following days were all spent busily despite the fact we had to stay in the northern building—and eventually it came time for my meeting with Sylvester. He was coming to me, in part because I wasn't allowed to go to him but also because there was a barrier here and a sizable portion of the Knight's Order was absent for the investigation.

"Bonifatius wanted to join; is that alright?" Sylvester asked upon his arrival. I'd wanted this to be a secret conversation, but maybe Bonifatius was continuing his role as a monitor for the Leisegangs.

Well, he's part of the archducal family too, so it would make sense to get him on our side.

There was no reason to consider him an enemy. Sure, he was going along with the Leisegangs, but that was because he was concerned about me and wanted to save me from the temple. He wasn't part of the group that was absolutely dead set on making me into the next aub.

"I think my being here is reasonable enough," Bonifatius said. "Now that Ferdinand is gone, I've needed to come out of retirement to help with paperwork. You have nothing to hide, right?"

I smiled, shook my head, and gestured for him and Sylvester to sit opposite me. "You are more than welcome to join us, Grandfather. It must be tiresome doing all of that work. We have no secrets to keep from you, and if anything comes up that we would rather not have our retainers know, we will simply use sound-blocking magic tools."

Karstedt was standing behind Sylvester, as always.

It was strange having Bonifatius here instead of Ferdinand. He was so much broader and more muscular that the chair looked tiny in comparison, and the air he exuded was a lot more oppressive.

No sooner had I sipped my tea and eaten one of the sweets from the table—the usual routine to prove that nothing had been poisoned—than Bonifatius began to dig in. "It's been about a year since we had tea like this," he said to me.

I thought back to our breaks together during last year's Archduke Conference. Tea parties like this were a much simpler affair, since I didn't need to hold his hand and risk losing limbs in the process.

"Sorry to say this, but we won't be able to spend time together like this during this year's Archduke Conference," I noted. "I was asked to assist the royal family. Though... if you were to come to the temple, we could always have tea there."

Bonifatius frowned and muttered, "The temple..." It seemed that he really did find it unpleasant.

"Melchior's retainers will soon start going there on a regular basis, as will mine," I said. "I will not force you to come, but I would suggest that you drop by at least once; the temple is not what you might expect. I will welcome you with sweets, and I am sure Angelica would be overjoyed to see you."

Bonifatius continued to knit his brow but said that he would consider it. I really wanted to change his impression of the temple, no matter how long it might take.

I turned to Sylvester. "Now, about Melchior entering the temple..." This was the primary reason I had given for our meeting. I explained what preparations Melchior would need and asked that he be given a budget. "I must also ask that you give us permission to take some of the furniture being stored in the castle for use in the temple. Oh, and we require a cook from the court kitchens. We can offer a gray shrine maiden to serve as an assistant. You could even hire a new one and have them train to one day work in an Italian restaurant."

"You want to train a cook in Melchior's kitchen...?" Bonifatius asked, his light-blue eyes widening. Using already trained chefs was common practice, but he had never even considered training one from the ground up.

Sylvester nodded on my behalf and noted that this was normal in my kitchens.

"The lower city's Italian restaurant is a place that merchants of all duchies wish to visit at least once," I said. "If we are to open an Italian restaurant in Groschel after performing its *entwickeln*, then we will need to start training chefs now. Otherwise, we will not have time."

Naturally, I intended to train chefs in my own kitchen as well. Ella had already made it clear that she wanted to have children, so this would give her a chance to take some time off.

“Also,” I continued, “Charlotte has informed me that the children of the playroom were mostly abandoned over the winter.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Sylvester protested at once. “They were given food, looked after by the playroom’s attendants, and allowed to meet with any of their parents who came to visit.”

I shook my head. “I don’t mean their living conditions were poor. I was told that, because the teachers were all going to the northern building for Melchior, the children in the playroom received no education whatsoever. You must keep in mind that they no longer have parents to hire family tutors for them. If something does not change, their education will end up in a truly dire state.”

Bonifatius was blinking in disbelief, but Sylvester merely said, “And?” I could tell that he wanted me to get to the point.

“I intend to host them in the temple as apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens.”

“Hmm? Why?”

“To educate them, supply the temple with mana, and distance them from the malice of the gossiping nobles. Of course, this will all come at a price, and the expenses will need to come from the children’s parents, but I think it will do the children a lot more good than staying in the playroom. What do you think?”

Sylvester stroked his chin in thought. Meanwhile, Bonifatius gave me an incredulous look and said, “Rozemyne, why are you going to such lengths for the children of criminals?”

“They did not commit any crimes themselves, and it makes no sense to punish the innocent,” I replied plainly. “Further, Ehrenfest is already suffering from a lack of nobles. Yes, crushing these children would be simple, but why would we deny ourselves such valuable manpower? Though it may require some effort, we are much better off aiding them, educating them, and getting them to work for the duchy.”

Bonifatius stared at me, bemused. “So you’re acting out of self-interest?”

“As I always do. I evaluated the situation as a member of the archducal family and determined that this is the best response. Others may call me a saint, but I am nothing of the sort, nor do I presume that I can save everyone for free.”

I explained that Ehrenfest had a small population for a middle duchy and that we had to pay close attention to the rituals and mana that supported our harvest. Bonifatius might not have realized it yet because he didn’t attend the Interduchy Tournament, but the general consensus about religious ceremonies was changing all across Yurgenschmidt.

After returning my attention to Sylvester, I continued, “Taking the children left in the playroom as apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens would give Florencia one less job to do. It would help both her and Charlotte. So, how do you feel about it?”

“I don’t mind, but... what will the Leisegangs say?” Sylvester adopted a thoroughly exasperated expression and turned to Bonifatius, who was presumably his window into the Leisegangs’ collective mind.

“Oh, have the Leisegangs already offered to look after the children?” I asked. “I cannot think of any other reason why the aub would need to be concerned about the opinions of giebés.” I gave a very exaggerated sigh and then said, “It seems that you’ve been carrying out many unreasonable tasks for the Leisegangs in return for their support and cooperation. My existence has caused so many issues, dear adoptive father, and I thank you ever so much for shouldering the burden of dealing with them all.”

“Rozemyne, how do you know that?!” Bonifatius exclaimed. He looked at Sylvester, who hadn’t reacted anywhere near as much, and then at Karstedt, who put up his hands as if to say that he wasn’t to blame. It was a likely sign that Bonifatius had been keeping a close eye on his and Elvira’s movements after completely cutting off my contact with Sylvester.

“Sylvester acted so unlike his usual self during our meeting the other day, and it was easy to infer that something must be happening beneath the surface. Thus, I gathered intelligence from my Leisegang retainers. I do not know the details but, Sylvester—you and Wilfried were given some manner of tasks to

complete, were you not?”

This time, Sylvester reacted strongly. His features hardened into a look of complete outrage, which he directed at Bonifatius as he shouted, “What’s the meaning of this?! I was told that, as long as I accepted their conditions, my children wouldn’t be dragged into this! Explain!”

“I was unaware of this,” Bonifatius replied, frowning. It seemed that we were all relying on mere fragments of the whole picture.

“As I understand it,” I said, “extremists within the Leisegang faction are trying to divide the archducal family. Charlotte is worried that the tasks being forced upon Wilfried are part of a plan to make me the next aub.”

“What in the...?” Sylvester muttered, the blood draining from his face. Bonifatius wasn’t looking too good either. It seemed that they had different information from the Leisegangs.

“Rozemyne, have you told Wilfried about the danger of his tasks?” Sylvester asked.

“His retainers weren’t willing to communicate with me. It’s possible that one of the tasks he was given was to make me act more like a first wife, considering that they kept telling me to support him as his fiancée. They must consider me a latent enemy because I already have the Leisegangs’ support.”

I’d assumed this was all par for the course, but Bonifatius was far from amused. “They would treat you, his fiancée, as an enemy?!” he roared.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “But are you not behaving like our enemy too, keeping an eye on Sylvester and me at the Leisegangs’ request? You have had a scary look on your face ever since I returned from the Royal Academy.”

“Th-That’s not true! I’m not scary, right? Do I look scary?” Bonifatius stammered, clapping his hands against his cheeks. It was such an unexpected sight that Sylvester burst into laughter, and the tension in the room immediately dissipated.

“You don’t look scary anymore,” I said, chuckling as well. “You’re just worried about me, right? You’ll always be on my side?”

“Of course!”

“Then know that Sylvester is not treating me poorly in the least, and try not to look so terrifying in the future.”

“R-Right...”

I smiled at Bonifatius, who gave me a conflicted nod, and then looked back at Sylvester. “I only know what Hartmut and the others have told me, so I cannot say whether my understanding of the situation is the truth. I was told not to be intrusive in meetings, and I was worried that this discussion might be seen as meddling, but...”

“Nah, I owe you one,” Sylvester said, shaking his head in all seriousness. “Now that Ferdinand is gone, my information network is crippled.”

In the past, it had apparently been common for Ferdinand to compile Justus’s intelligence into curated reports, which he would send to Sylvester alongside a few notes on how to react. Sylvester really was struggling without him.

“I’m impressed that Hartmut knows as much as he does,” Sylvester added.

“Well, Justus did teach him in the temple. Hartmut hasn’t managed to cast as wide a net, but he certainly does know a lot about the Leisegangs.” I promised to pass his findings straight on to Sylvester going forward.

Bonifatius gave me a stern look. “Rozemyne, why do you trust Sylvester this much? Do you not worry that he’s trying to deceive you?”

“Of course not. Were he so cruel, he would have simply killed me to save himself the trouble. Or he could have ended my adoption and returned me to the rank of an archnoble, stripping me of my claim to the archducal seat. He’s done neither of these things; on the contrary, he’s shouldering all of the Leisegangs’ demands for my sake. Why would I *not* trust him when he’s doing so much to protect me?”

One could argue that getting rid of me wasn’t even an option for Sylvester; my mana contributions to the archducal family were too essential now that Ferdinand was gone. Still, he was dealing with the problems that I was making instead of giving up on them, and that deserved praise in itself.

“Yes, Sylvester complains about his work and tries to shirk his duties on a regular basis,” I said. “He can also do some very doltish things, like impregnating my adoptive mother during these chaotic times. But when it counts, he really does put his neck on the line to protect me. I won’t hesitate to help him when I can.”

“Rozemyne...”

“In truth, I’m far more troubled by the Leisegangs, who are stirring up chaos while claiming to be my supporters.” And that brought me to the true focus of our meeting: our plan to enact a generational shift that would snuff out the will of the Leisegangs for good. “I understand why people might be opposed to sudden change, but the Zent himself asked us to begin acting like a proper top-ranking duchy. We might as well consider that a royal decree, no?”

Sylvester grinned. “Yeah, you’re not wrong.”

“Thus, I believe we should establish a clear delineation of roles within the duchy.”

“A delineation of roles?” Bonifatius repeated.

“Yes, Grandfather. Ehrenfest’s rise through the rankings is unlikely to affect the giebes overseeing our duchy’s crops, so I think we should have some of our most conservative nobles replace those who were removed during the purge. Giebes Gerlach, Wiltord, and the others started complete pandemonium with their decision to give their names to Lady Georgine, but there were no problems with their leadership. To my knowledge, their harvests were always bountiful as well.”

I was familiar enough with the crop yields of every province because I reported them to the aub after the Harvest Festival. The giebes in question had done fine jobs.

“For that reason,” I continued, “we should replace the removed giebes with people who value consistency and are likely to follow exactly in their predecessors’ footsteps—people who know the struggles of sudden change all too well. That should make the transition of power easy on the farmers and servants of those provinces.”

Sylvester gave an amused smile. “Makes sense, but there are always some hiccups when taking on a new role. Plus, we don’t want to officially make them giebés and then discover they don’t have what it takes, so I’ll give them each a three-year trial period. You archduke candidates can speak with the farmers and servants when you visit the provinces for Spring Prayer or the Harvest Festival; if you discover that the new giebés are doing well, I’ll allow them to keep their positions. This should ensure that they work hard to prove themselves and aren’t unfair to their people.”

“As for the more ambitious and forward-thinking nobles, let us assign them duties in the castle, no matter their faction.”

“No matter their faction?!” Bonifatius cried. I didn’t consider any of my suggestions to be particularly strange, but he was taken aback by them all. It just went to show how much my way of thinking differed from that of standard nobles.

Now that I thought about it, were Ferdinand and Sylvester strange for actually listening to my ideas and adopting the ones they agreed with?

“Those who committed crimes have already been punished or distanced, have they not?” I asked. “The former Veronica faction is as good as gone, and we cannot afford to cast aside talented and motivated individuals. That said... Charlotte did identify a weakness in this plan.”

I went on to explain Charlotte’s concern, on top of what we had discussed with my retainers.

“I see,” Sylvester murmured. “It’s a good idea but doesn’t stand strong enough on its own. Charlotte has a keen eye.”

“Indeed, she does. She also said that taking a second wife from Leisegang would serve as the most peaceful resolution. This seems to overlap with Dunkelfelger’s advice that we should have a first wife who focuses on interduchy diplomacy and a second who keeps our nobles under control.”

In response, Sylvester gave a bit of a gloomy expression.

Brunhilde's Suggestion

"May I have permission to speak, Aub Ehrenfest?" Brunhilde asked, stepping forth from among my otherwise silent retainers. She looked tense, but her amber eyes were full of resolve.

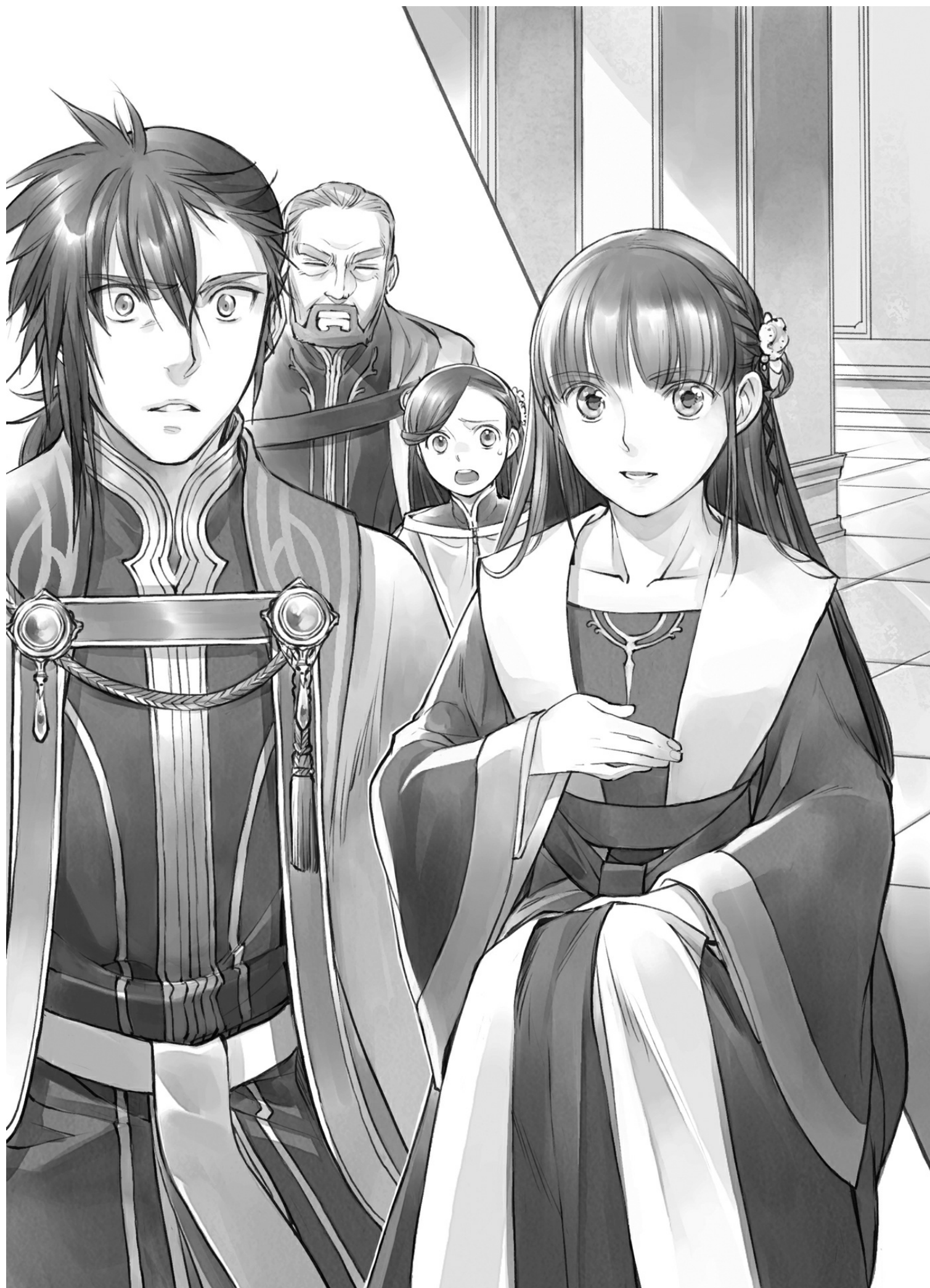
Sylvester nodded.

After offering a few words of thanks, Brunhilde gracefully approached Sylvester. She knelt in front of him, crossed her arms, and declared, "I am Brunhilde, daughter of Giebe Groschel. I have just finished my fifth year at the Royal Academy."

"Yeah, you were recognized as an honor student," Sylvester replied offhandedly. "I saw you at the Interduchy Tournament and during the awards ceremony."

"I am honored to have received your attention," Brunhilde said. She then looked Sylvester straight in the eye and asked, "Will you grant me the position of your second wife, Aub Ehrenfest?"

The room fell dead silent, and we all stared at the kneeling Brunhilde. I couldn't even process what I'd just heard. And it had come completely out of the blue!



The aub's second wife? Brunhilde? Brunhilde marrying Sylvester?!

As soon as I managed to connect the dots, I was overcome with panic. I practically leapt to my feet with a loud clatter and managed a single step toward my kneeling retainer.

“Um, what?! Hold on! Hold your horses! Take a deep breath, Brunhilde! You need to get a grip!”

“I think *you* need to get a grip,” Sylvester retorted. He stood up as well, came to my side of the table, and started rubbing my back. “Breathe. Breeeathe.”

“Hee hee hoo... Hee hee hoo...”

“Uh, what are those noises?”

“Sorry. They... just kind of came out. What did they mean, I wonder?”

“How the heck am I supposed to know? Calm down.”

I took in my surroundings, wide-eyed. Sylvester seemed entirely unmoved by Brunhilde’s explosive suggestion, while Bonifatius was fidgeting a little, no doubt concerned that I was losing my marbles.

“I... I don’t... Grandfather! I don’t know *how* to calm down!”

“I know exactly how you feel, Rozemyne.”

As we both wriggled and squirmed, Lieseleta quietly approached. “Excuse me,” she said, and produced a stuffed shumil from seemingly nowhere.

“Contain yourself, fool,” said a familiar voice. It was Ferdinand—well, his shumil equivalent. “Breathe in.”

I snapped back to reality and reflexively began sucking in air. I gulped down more and more, waiting for him to tell me to breathe out again... but he never did. My lungs soon became too full to hold any more—and, when it hurt too much to bear any longer, I finally exhaled.

“Just how much air did you want me to breathe in, Ferdinand?!” I snapped at the stuffed shumil, my eyes brimming with tears.

Lieseleta smiled. “I am glad you remembered the deep breathing technique, Lady Rozemyne. I now ask that you remember to act more like a noblewoman.”

Holding the cute shumil in her arms, she activated the magic tool again. “And you call yourself an archduke candidate?” it said. “Embarrassing.”

I swiftly returned to my chair and sat up straight. “I’m fine now. I’m calm. Let us continue our discussion.”

“Hm. That works, huh?” Sylvester mused aloud. “Good job. You can stand down.”

After praising Lieseleta for her quick-wittedness, he went back to his seat and cast his eyes from me to Brunhilde. “Judging by Rozemyne’s reaction, I assume you didn’t consult her about this,” he said.

“That is correct,” Brunhilde replied in a hushed voice. “I did not discuss this with Lady Rozemyne, nor with my father Giebe Groschel. Lady Florencia and the other archduke candidates know not about this either.”

Sylvester’s eyebrow twitched, but he let her continue.

“Lady Rozemyne is only slightly aware of this, but she is a dominant power within the Leisegang faction. My father, Giebe Groschel, also holds great influence. Had I discussed this with them in advance and put my request to you formally, Aub Ehrenfest, then it would have been very hard for you to refuse. That is why I am acting independently. If you oppose my suggestion, then you can pretend it was merely a spur-of-the-moment jest.”

It seemed she had concluded that this was the only way we could discuss the idea without it being chained to the will of the Leisegangs.

Brunhilde continued, “I also believe that, rather than having me forced upon you as your second wife, you should choose someone whom you think will be able to lead Ehrenfest. I am told that you decided to pair Lord Wilfried with Lady Rozemyne for the sake of the duchy, so I expect you will take another wife for the same reason.”

Let’s translate that: “You need to pick a second wife instead of pushing everything onto your son and adopted daughter. Stop trying to run away from your duty.”

Sylvester looked away from Brunhilde for a moment, as if conceding to her straightforward stare, then met her gaze again. “I’ll hear you out,” he said.

“My gratitude is yours,” Brunhilde replied. Then, in a calm voice and while continuing to kneel, she said, “I did not know this before hearing Lady Charlotte’s position and proactively gathering intelligence within the Leisegang faction, but it seems that Leisegang considers the archducal family’s position—that prioritizing a union with a top-ranking duchy is more important than marrying a noble within Ehrenfest, even so soon after the purge—to be very dangerous. They are once again starting to doubt that Lady Rozemyne will end up marrying Lord Wilfried.”

This position had reignited claims that I should be the duchy’s next ruler instead, strengthened the argument that neither Sylvester nor the next aub needed a wife from a top-ranking duchy, and given birth to the opinion that “we don’t want any brides from top-ranking duchies here; if raising our rank means we have to take them in, then we’d rather not raise our rank at all.”

“Up until this point, the Leisegangs have strengthened their bonds with the aub through marriage. You can assuage most of their concerns simply by taking a Leisegang wife and indicating that you respect them.”

She managed to find out all that since my meeting with Charlotte? My retainers sure are super talented.

It seemed that Hartmut wasn’t the only skilled intelligence gatherer in my service. Or maybe being a Leisegang had made it easy for her.

“A second wife can have a tremendous impact on a duchy’s future,” Brunhilde continued, “and I realize that even making this suggestion would normally require a lot more groundwork. I really did not intend to come forward, but I could no longer bear to watch matters as they were.” She looked sympathetically at Sylvester and his retainers. “My decision to speak is based on the understanding that Ehrenfest is in a dire state wherein every moment counts.”

“‘Every moment counts’?” I repeated, cocking my head. “What do you mean?”

“It seems to me that, during the purge, Aub Ehrenfest punished more than half of his retinue. The situation is so serious that he needed to borrow Lady Florencia’s retainers just to come here to the northern building. I imagine these

conditions are having a significant impact on the archducal couple's duties."

"What?!"

Sylvester and Florencia were my adoptive parents, but I didn't see them often enough to have memorized their retainers. My eyes widened, and I stared at Sylvester in shock.

Brunhilde explained: "Despite knowing each of your children's workloads, you as Aub Ehrenfest sought Lady Rozemyne's help rather than your blood daughter Lady Charlotte's during the archducal family meeting. I assume you did this not just because you were concerned about Lady Florencia's pregnancy but also because you needed Lady Rozemyne's help to replenish your retinue. With her supporting Lady Florencia, it would be easier to take Leisegang nobles as retainers. You wished to obtain the Leisegangs' support even through such indirect methods—is that correct, Aub Ehrenfest?"

Sylvester's lips shifted up a little, but he didn't respond. The fact that he hadn't rejected the idea was enough to guess that her analysis was correct.

"If one also considers how Aub Ehrenfest is relying on Lord Bonifatius to obtain intelligence, it becomes clear how urgently he requires the support of the Leisegangs. In light of Lady Florencia's condition, however, he will not be able to take a second wife for at least two years."

Oof... He's completely boxed in.

"However, as is obvious, I am underage; considering the one-year engagement period that would start after I graduate, we would need to wait at least two years for our Starbind Ceremony. By then, there would no longer be any risk of my mana influencing Lady Florencia's pregnancy and birth."

Brunhilde's amber eyes contained an unmistakable sparkle as she continued, "If you announce that you are going to take a second wife from the Leisegang faction, I expect that their concerns will gradually fade, much like they have in the past. Marrying the daughter of the province that was both Lady Veronica's home and the one most aggressively opposed to her would mean more to the Leisegangs than you anticipate, Aub Ehrenfest." She smiled. "And, with a fiancée, it would be much easier for you to refuse any marriage proposals you receive during the Archduke Conference."

Brunhilde had employed that last remark precisely because she knew that Sylvester wasn't at all motivated to take a wife from another duchy and was agonizing over the inevitable flood of proposals.

"Lady Rozemyne often spends time locked away in the temple, but I, her attendant, am mostly in the castle," Brunhilde said. "It would therefore be more than possible for me to stand at the forefront of socializing with the Leisegangs. I was also part of the same faction as Lady Florencia to begin with, meaning I will provide her support and never oppose her. I can make up for her absence while cooperating with Lady Charlotte, whom I even socialized alongside in the Royal Academy."

Brunhilde puffed out her chest and continued, "I was a central figure in all of Lady Rozemyne's tea parties and meetings with top-ranking duchies and the royal family, for I took charge of preparing for them and hosting the guests. I am confident that I have more experience socializing with top-ranking duchies than almost anyone else in Ehrenfest. Were I to become the aub's fiancée, I would be able to cooperate with Lady Charlotte while simultaneously training attendants who would be going to the Archduke Conference."

As the retainer of an adopted daughter, Brunhilde would struggle to speak authoritatively to the adult retainers of the archducal couple and others. As the second wife working hard to support the first, however, she would be able to do whatever was needed. It would become much easier for her to use her experience to produce attendants capable of dealing with top-ranking duchies.

"If we can compensate for Lady Florencia's absence and make quick progress on the generational shift that Lady Rozemyne had suggested, it should become easier to make use of the younger members of the former Veronica faction," Brunhilde said. "That should also allow you to bring back the retainers you were forced to distance."

Sylvester narrowed his eyes just a little, watching her closely. "You're obviously a lot more observant than I expected, and nobody can deny that you've considered all this very carefully. However, I'm not sure you should be so readily offering to become my second wife and—"

"That's right!" I exclaimed. "Brunhilde! You are so considerate, talented, and

amazing! It would be a complete waste for you to be the second wife of Sylvester, of all people! You're so much cooler and more reliable than he is!"

"Uh, Rozemyne?" Sylvester said, his mouth twitching as everyone else tried to stifle their laughter. His frustrations meant nothing to me, though; I was only speaking the truth.

"I mean, he already has Florencia. He loves her more than anyone, doesn't have eyes for any other women, and complains nonstop that he doesn't want to take a second wife. I can't see a future where you're happy being married to a man like him, and that's why I'm opposed to it. If you're going to marry anyone, I want it to be a man who'll treat you right and show you nothing but love and respect."

Brunhilde's eyes widened in bewilderment. "If that is the case, why did you agree to marry Lord Wilfried...? Do you expect him to show you love and consideration?"

"No, but he won't mind me using Ehrenfest's book rooms as I please. Our union will also help advance the printing industry."

"So you agree that love has no place in matters of marriage."

Ah! She's right! The only love I've considered is my love of books!

As someone who was already engaged, I should have chosen my words more carefully instead of saying the first thing that came to mind. I desperately racked my brain, trying to figure out how I could recover from this.

"Er, um... But... You know, Wilfried and I love each other as family. We've always been on good terms, and his promises to Ferdinand and Giebe Leisegang mean that we'll stay that way. Even if our marriage is a political one, I don't think he'll ever treat me poorly."

Brunhilde gave me a very uncomfortable look, while Sylvester grimaced. "Rozemyne, do you think I'll treat Brunhilde poorly?" he asked me. "She's the daughter of Giebe Groschel. How can you think I'd do something so foolish?"

"Um. Umm... I guess that, as Aub Ehrenfest, you would indeed put some effort into being nice to her."

“Some effort? Take this, you little fiend.” Sylvester prodded my cheeks, looking very thoroughly displeased. It actually hurt, so I called out for Bonifatius to help me.

In one smooth motion, my savior smacked Sylvester’s hand away with a loud, “Hmph!”

“GAAAH! Hold back a little, will you?! Geez!”

“Um... Do you need me to heal you, Sylvester?” I asked. “I think I heard something crack...”

“Nah, nah. The important thing right now is that your retainer wants to be my second wife and is ready for whatever that entails, while you seem entirely against the idea. Should I take this as your official stance?”

I turned to Brunhilde for her opinion.

“Lady Rozemyne,” she said with a very pretty smile, “I sought to be your retainer because I wished to market your trends. I am glad that my wish was granted, but now I can take this even further as the aub’s second wife, marketing trends through you and Lady Florencia.” Her face lit up with hope and ambition. “I would also appreciate the opportunity to challenge myself and set my own trends as a member of the archducal family.”

This wasn’t the stance of someone sacrificing themselves to contain the Leisegangs. Rather, she had found the perfect opportunity to make her dream come true and was using it to the fullest.

Ngh! Brunhilde is way too cool.

“As his second wife, Lady Rozemyne, I could take care of socializing within the duchy in your stead. There would be no need for you to learn all the ways of the old world. They are a thing of the past. I wish to unite Ehrenfest so that there are no problems whatsoever when it comes time for you to rule with Lord Wilfried.”

“The attitude of a model retainer,” Bonifatius remarked. “Very respectable. I acknowledge you as Sylvester’s second wife.”

Grandfather likes her? Wait, whaaat just happened?!

Paying my confusion no mind, Bonifatius sat back down with a satisfied grin and returned to sipping his tea. Brunhilde was giving me a fixed stare, waiting for me to either approve or refuse her suggestion.

“I think Brunhilde’s decision is best for Ehrenfest,” I eventually said, “but I would not like to lose her as a retainer.”

Brunhilde gave a small smile. “Then please allow me to serve you until my graduation, at least. That is when most female retainers are expected to resign and get married anyway, is it not?”

“That’s true, but...”

“I will train Bertilde and Gretia so that you are not troubled without me. Please rest assured.”

In the majority of cases, women who came of age would resign almost immediately to get married. Sylvester had thus told me to train new retainers and welcome some of the mature women who had already had children into my service. Looking at those of my retainers who were close to coming of age actually made me a little sad.

Sylvester sighed, having watched our exchange. “Brunhilde, what about Groschel’s successor?” he asked. “Aren’t you expected to take a husband who can support you being the next giebe?”

Oh yeah. Brunhilde was, in fact, supposed to become the next Giebe Groschel. Maybe her father would forbid her from becoming the aub’s second wife. But before we could dwell on the idea for much longer, Brunhilde dismissed the notion with a somewhat bitter smile.

“Perhaps I could go out and find a husband to that end, but my little sister, Bertilde, will surely find someone much more talented once I am Ehrenfest’s second wife and Groschel has finished its transformation into a commerce city. Besides, Father’s second wife seems to have given birth to a boy, who may end up being made the successor instead.”

If a family had a son available, they would generally make him their successor. As such, even though Giebe Groschel wouldn’t announce it until his newborn son came of age, we could guess that Brunhilde had already been told that she

wouldn't be the next giebe. I knew it was tradition, but it saddened me to think that her hard work preparing for the role had effectively been stomped on.

"I think what matters most for Groschel right now is working with the archducal family and making sure this entwickeln succeeds," Brunhilde said. She had been planning to marry a skilled and competent man from another duchy to help support her province, but few talented men would want to marry into a province that failed its revolution.

In particular, with Florencia's pregnancy shifting the schedule and causing various plans to change, Brunhilde thought that bringing a husband into Groschel was less important than marrying into the archducal family and using her position as second wife to ensure the entwickeln succeeded.

"Aub Ehrenfest could take responsibility for renovating Groschel, but my father would feel disrespected and may even protest," Brunhilde explained. "By having me arbitrate as the second wife, however, we can instead make him feel that he is receiving special treatment."

She really was overflowing with the resolve to make her province's entwickeln succeed, no matter the cost. In my opinion, there was no one better suited to becoming the next giebe.

"I should note that I have my own reasons for wanting to become second wife," Brunhilde said, "but I am not seeking the aub's favor. Rather, I wish to use my skills to their fullest in service of supporting Ehrenfest." She then confidently reiterated that Sylvester was free to refuse her proposal, since she had deliberately acted alone.

Sylvester chuckled, went over to Brunhilde, and extended a hand to her. "Your spirit's won me over," he said. "I'll request a meeting with Giebe Groschel. Prepare an outfit good enough to be worn onstage during the upcoming feast and a proposal feystone."

"I am honored," Brunhilde replied, taking his hand with a victorious smile. Her flowing crimson hair cascaded down her back.

Bwuh... Brunhilde, marrying Sylvester?

This was something she wanted, and I knew it would be best for Ehrenfest,

but still... I couldn't really throw my hands up and celebrate. My head was a mess of conflicting emotions. I wasn't used to the whole concept of second wives to begin with. Hearing about it in passing was fine, since I could just write it off as part of the culture in this world, but the thought that it was going to happen to someone close to me just felt wrong.

Especially when Sylvester truly loves his first wife.

Here in Yurgenschmidt, it was normal to have your father decide your partner for you, so the fact that Brunhilde had fought for and won an engagement she wanted could be seen as a huge victory. At the same time, however, I thought it was concerning that this had all been decided while the first wife was absent and pregnant. I was worried about how Florencia would take the news.

"Hmm? An ordonnanz?" Bonifatius suddenly muttered, setting down the sweet in his hand and glaring out the window. We all followed his gaze, but there was nothing there.

"I don't see anything..." I said.

"Give it a moment."

About ten seconds later, a rough outline of the ordonnanz came into view. It flew into the room and perched on Karstedt's arm, all while I was still reeling over the absurd strength of Bonifatius's eyesight.

"Commander," the bird said, "this is a report from Gerlach."

We all stared intently at the ordonnanz. The Knight's Order had taken Matthias and the others to investigate Gerlach. Had something happened there?

"After we investigated several hidden rooms," it continued, "Gerlach's son suggested that the giebe might yet live. We ask that you come to the scene as soon as you can."

Bonifatius was the first to stand. He met Sylvester's gaze and nodded.

"Stay here, Karstedt," Sylvester said. "I need to focus on winning over the Leisegangs."

"Right," Bonifatius added, "and there won't be any mistakes this time. I refuse

to come back empty-handed.”

And with that, he flew out of the room, his retainers hot on his heels.

“Matthias and the others—”

Before I could even finish, Sylvester replied, “They’ll be supporting Bonifatius. Karstedt, I’m going.”

Karstedt gave a firm nod in response. His fists were clenched, like he really wanted to rush off as well.

Sylvester looked back down at me, then flicked me on the forehead. “Your retainers are there, Rozemyne. You don’t need to go too. I understand your impatience, but Ferdinand was the one who always looked after you, and he’s not here anymore. There’s no longer anyone who can save you from whatever mess you end up in.”

“Right...”

“That goes for the both of us,” he said. “We’ll be in for a world of trouble if we keep acting like we used to.” And then, like Bonifatius, he briskly exited the room.

“Brunhilde, do you need any help with your outfit or proposal feystone?” I asked, my eyes still fixed on the door that Sylvester and the others had left through. “You don’t have much time, do you? Will you be able to manage?” We had returned to Ehrenfest first out of all the Royal Academy students, so we had more time before the spring feast than usual, but that still didn’t amount to much.

“I would struggle to order new clothes on such short notice, and wearing them would lead to negative assumptions that I’ve been planning this for some time...” she replied. “Thus, I simply intend to alter what I wore at the start of winter socializing to make it a bit fancier. As for the feystone, thanks to you, I already have some rather high-quality specimens. I am sure one will suffice. It would be best to begin making it now, but I must wait for Aub Ehrenfest to speak with Father.”

It was important to make it look as though Sylvester were proactively seeking the Leisegangs’ support instead of merely acting at Brunhilde’s suggestion. We

would all need to pretend we hadn't heard anything until the discussion with Giebe Groschel took place.

Brunhilde concluded, "I expect that I will receive a sudden summons from Father, then rush home to begin preparing."

"Very well," I said. "I am going to be spending the time until the spring feast at my leisure. I cannot leave the northern building under any circumstances, nor can we summon the Plantin Company here when wide-scale punishments have put the castle in such a grim state. Our yearly book sale is going to be canceled too, so you may dedicate yourself to your preparations."

Otilie and Lieseleta nodded along with me, wearing reassuring smiles, while Gretia declared that she would be working hard too. Rihyarda, in contrast, stepped forward with a bit of a stony expression, like she was agonizing over something.

"Milady, it truly does pain me to say this, but I have a heartfelt request. If possible, might you permit me to return to Lord Sylvester's side?"

It had been Sylvester who assigned Rihyarda to me in the first place back when I became his adopted daughter. She had supported me when I was still adjusting to life as a noble and trained my retainers when I barely had any.

"You now have plenty of retainers," Rihyarda said, "both from the Leisegang and the former Veronica factions. They all serve you properly and work very well together. Thus, I would like to return to serving Lord Sylvester, who has so few retainers right now that he is having to share with his wife."

"I understand your concern very well, Rihyarda. It really is hard when you don't have retainers you can trust."

The demands placed on the archducal family required us to entrust our work, our comfort, and even our lives to our retainers. I was more aware than anyone that you couldn't just act as you pleased; doing that would get you in trouble with those in your service. In short, trying to function without retainers you could trust was borderline impossible. Your entire world would crumble around you. I couldn't even begin to imagine what my life would be like if I abruptly lost more than half of my current retinue.

“Now that Brunhilde is becoming Ehrenfest’s second wife, it would also be best for someone to arbitrate between her and Lady Florencia,” Rihyarda continued. “Brunhilde will surely feel more comfortable during the engagement if she can see someone familiar by the archducal couple’s side.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Brunhilde said, “and your being there will definitely help me, but will Lady Rozemyne not struggle if she loses two attendants at once?”

That was a good question. I pondered it while looking over my attendants.

“Once the feast celebrating spring is over, milady will return to the temple,” Rihyarda said. “Otilie and Lieseleta will suffice for as long as she is there, and while Gretia’s education in the castle is not yet adequate, she is more than competent and will start catching up soon enough. You will remain her attendant at the Royal Academy, and Bertilde is expected to join her service. I do not believe she will be nearly as troubled as the archducal family is now.”

Not all of Wilfried’s attendants had been replaced, meaning there were still a few members of the former Veronica faction among them, but I didn’t know the details of what had happened to them. Melchior should have been in the winter playroom with the other kids, starting to pick his own retainers, but instead he was isolated in the northern building. He only had the adult retainers his parents had chosen for him and three older student retainers to guide him.

“Rihyarda is correct,” I said. “Out of everyone in the archducal family, Charlotte and I have the most stable entourages right now. It would be better for me to let Rihyarda go than have Charlotte move her retainers to support Florencia, especially as I intend to hide away in the temple.”

Plus, Rihyarda had served Sylvester to begin with. She would be able to resume her duties under him without the need for any adjustments or training.

Brunhilde nodded. “In that case, I will have a long conversation with Lady Elvira and make sure that Bertilde’s education is completed by next winter.” She had already begun planning for the future.

I turned my attention from Brunhilde to Rihyarda. “From the castle to the Royal Academy, you have always been there to support me. I am going to feel very lonely without you, I must admit... but I know that my adoptive father is

struggling even more. Please lend him your support.”

“You have my thanks, milady.”

I informed those in my service that Ottilie was soon to be my new head attendant, then sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester. “I am returning Rihyarda to you,” it said. “Please employ her as a retainer.”

“I’m not about to steal more of your retainers!” came his immediate and very loud response, but I paid it no mind.

“Rihyarda,” I said, “this is my last order for you as your lady. Give my adoptive father a firm spanking—and make sure he does *all* of his paperwork. Also, I would ask that you manage the main building such that news about Brunhilde becoming Ehrenfest’s second wife does not bother my adoptive mother during her pregnancy. My wish is that she welcomes Brunhilde as an ally.”

“Consider it all done, milady. And... everyone, I entrust Lady Rozemyne to you.”

“You may count on us.”

From there, I sent Rihyarda on her way. Sylvester would have no choice but to accept her now that I was pretty much forcing her upon him. Plus, he was literally desperate for retainers he could trust right now. That much was obvious.

Sometime later, I received an ordonnanz from Sylvester, thanking me. Rihyarda had evidently managed to change his tune.

Changing Surroundings and the Feast Celebrating Spring

Sylvester took immediate action against Giebe Groschel and the Leisegang faction. It was possible that Rihyarda was hurrying him, or maybe having her by his side had made it easier to speak with the Leisegangs. Perhaps he was simply able to move freely now that Bonifatius had departed for Gerlach. Though I wasn't entirely sure of the reason, one thing was clear: it was happening.

Brunhilde received a summons from her family the next evening while Cornelius and Lamprecht were summoned by Elvira for questioning. Everyone around me had suddenly become very busy... but I was still stuck in the northern building. This gave me an unusual abundance of spare time, so I started reading the books that Hannelore had lent me.

The first volume contained religious tales that hadn't made it into the bible, and they were really entertaining. Most of the stories in the bible were about the gods performing heroic and awe-inspiring feats, but these were more about their relationships with one another.

Surprisingly enough, among the stories contained in the book was one we had gathered during Operation Grimm. In it, Flutrane the Goddess of Water bathed with her subordinates, sharing her power with them and washing away Ewigeliebe the God of Life. She had given her healing to Leidenschaft and Schutzaria as well, apparently. The tale also mentioned there being a barrier to block all men—a consequence of Leidenschaft's subordinates trying to peek while the women were bathing—and a feyplant called "sielore," which extended its branches and produced white flowers, from which green droplets fell. The droplets had potent restorative properties, which reminded me of the rairein nectar we had gathered.

Speaking of which... Ferdinand and the other boys encountered a barrier at The Goddesses' Bath, didn't they? They could still see us, though, so maybe it wasn't working right... I wonder, is there another bathing spot like that in

Dunkelfelger?

I continued to read, comparing the stories to similar ones we'd gathered from the provinces, until an ordonnanz flew into the room. It was from Matthias and the others.

"We are doing fine. Using his masterfully honed instincts, Lord Bonifatius is moving the investigation along."

"Grandfather sure is incredible," I replied. "I hope you can all return soon."

For some reason, from that point on, I started to receive frequent ordonnanzes about Bonifatius's many achievements. It seemed pretty obvious that he wanted me to praise his efforts. I did my best to oblige him, for the sake of Matthias and the others.

But you know, Grandfather... all these reports are interrupting my reading.

I got Hartmut to convey Bonifatius's grand achievements to Sylvester. He was no doubt receiving similar reports from the Knight's Order, but hearing things from another perspective was sure to be of use to him. At least, that was the excuse I was going with; my true intention was to sneak him intelligence about the Leisegangs and the state of the northern building. Doing so would give me enough leverage to have him give back the blue priests who didn't have any concerning memories.

In particular, I really wanted to have Frietack returned to me. He had developed into a real expert when it came to temple work.

Two days after Brunhilde's return to her home estate, Sylvester contacted me. He said that we had an important matter to discuss and that I was to eat dinner in the main building today. This was obviously to do with their engagement, so I got ready and went to the dining hall. It was a little strange to see Rihyarda standing behind Sylvester, busily directing attendants while serving his food.

After we had eaten, Sylvester made his announcement: "I will be taking Brunhilde, the daughter of Giebe Groschel, as a second wife. I already have the giebe's permission and am steadily obtaining the approval of the Leisegangs.

Our engagement will be announced after the feast celebrating spring.” He declared that this was his decision as aub, described the importance of working with Leisegang and Groschel, then put emphasis on his intention to compromise with the Leisegangs.

“Brunhilde?” Wilfried asked, furrowing his brow at me. “Rozemyne, isn’t she one of your apprentice attendants?”

I nodded. “Her father asked that she return home at once, and now I understand why. If only I had been consulted... I could have provided my support, but alas.”

Sylvester seemed to notice what I was doing and shrugged. “It might have been easy with your support, but I needed to prove that this decision to align with the Leisegangs was my own. I regret having to take one of your attendants, though; there were just so few Leisegang girls of the right age.”

Any who had already come of age would affect Florencia’s unborn child, but that wasn’t the main problem. Most of them, like Leonore, were already engaged—and they couldn’t just cast their fiancés aside to become the aub’s second wife. In more ways than one, Brunhilde was the perfect catch.

“I am glad that Brunhilde accepted your proposition,” Florencia said. “After the ravaging impact of the purge, it would have been difficult to take a second wife from an influential duchy. Further, from now until the day I give birth, Brunhilde has offered to socialize with Ehrenfest’s noblewomen in Rozemyne’s stead. She worked with Charlotte in the Royal Academy and said she would like to continue that cooperative relationship.”

I had been most worried about how Florencia would react, so it was reassuring to see her welcoming Brunhilde with such open arms.

Charlotte gave a relieved smile. “Brunhilde has yet to come of age, so the actual Starbind Ceremony will not take place for some time. I also believe that a daughter of Giebe Groschel will make a perfect partner for our duchy’s aub. Congratulations, Father.”

Melchior spoke a few words of congratulations as well, though his poor understanding of the situation made it clear that he was just copying Charlotte. Meanwhile, Wilfried said nothing. He offered no more than a look of

uncertainty... and with that, our meal came to an end.

So arrived the feast celebrating spring. We were waiting in the room closest to the grand hall, having been told to join everyone as late as we reasonably could. Our retainers arrived a short while later.

“Matthias, Laurenz, Muriella—welcome back,” I said. “Only five days have passed, but it feels like forever. Your work must have been very taxing. You may have tomorrow off, so please do your best for today’s feast.”

“We are honored.”

The feast was meant to be an occasion for all nobles to gather, so it had been postponed until the Knight’s Order returned from its investigation. I could only imagine how exhausting it must have been investigating the giebes’ estates under the time constraints. The reports I’d received hadn’t mentioned much beyond Bonifatius’s achievements, but their efforts had apparently borne fruit.

Muriella was drained, and rightly so—she had needed to fly back to Ehrenfest after seventh bell and was now going to participate in the feast without a moment of rest. Matthias and Laurenz, on the other hand, both seemed quite lively—though there was a particular woodenness to Matthias’s expression.

“Matthias,” I said, “you have on a most intimidating face. If you have already informed the aub about your investigation, then you may relax. You can report to me some other day.” It was already more or less confirmed that Giebe Gerlach was still alive, so the details could wait. At the very least, we didn’t need to rush through them right before the feast.

Soon enough, Ottilie guided us into the grand hall. The Leisegangs were grinning from ear to ear, doubtless having heard about the former Veronica faction’s eradication and Brunhilde’s engagement to the aub. And, indeed, Brunhilde was at the center of them all, wearing a spring outfit that made her crimson hair stand out wonderfully. She was speaking brightly to the elderly nobles, her back straight and her expression regal, while Elvira offered support beside her. I also spotted Bertilde, who was watching her big sister carefully.

Seems safe to leave the Leisegangs to Brunhilde, but we’ll need to deal with the nobles over there.

In contrast to the beaming Leisegangs, there were plenty of nobles lurking by the edges of the room, wearing sullen or otherwise antisocial expressions. They were presumably those of the former Veronica faction who had been punished less severely.

“I can’t tell whether it’s because fewer were executed than I thought or more have returned from their sentences but... it doesn’t seem like the noble population has changed much at all,” I said.

“You only think that because you’ve been insulated from it all,” Wilfried replied, focused on the crowd. “Even those who managed to avoid execution by association were still punished. I was made to distance several of my retainers. It hurt, having to turn my back on people who have supported me my whole life, even though they did nothing wrong.”

I followed his eyes to Oswald, his former head attendant. He had resigned two days after our return from the Royal Academy, saying that he could not risk creating an opening for the Leisegangs to exploit.

So... Wilfried ended up losing retainers just like Sylvester did.

“Hopefully, as we align with the Leisegang nobles, we also start hiring skilled nobles of the former Veronica faction soon,” I said. “Then you can take them as retainers again.”

We had suggested that underage retainers be spared punishment and those who hadn’t committed any crimes be given jobs to accelerate the generational shift. It was up to Wilfried and Sylvester to carefully consider the situation and decide both whom to hire in the castle and where to direct the nobility. I wished him luck in those endeavors so that he could get his retainers back.

“You make it sound as though it has nothing to do with you.”

“I simply have my own work to do. My orders are to keep my head down and entrust such matters to you, our next aub. Not to mention, I’m leaving female socializing to Brunhilde and Charlotte. My intention is to hide in the temple and stay as far away from the public eye as I can.”

Wilfried escorted me to the front row with a stiff expression—and, not long after, the archducal couple seemed to appear from behind us. Without giving

anyone time to greet him, Sylvester announced the beginning of the feast.

“Flutrane the Goddess of Water’s pure streams have washed away Ewigeliebe the God of Life and rescued Geduldh the Goddess of Earth. Blessed be the melting of the snow!”

First came an announcement of our grades at the Royal Academy. I was the only one from Ehrenfest to have come first-in-class this year, but we had plenty of honor students. We three archduke candidates and several of our retainers climbed onstage to receive praise and rewards, as was now the norm.

“It is a joyous occasion for there to be so many skilled students among those who will one day support Ehrenfest,” Sylvester said. “Hone your talents and maintain your grades.”

Sylvester then told the gathered nobles what had occurred at the Royal Academy this year. He mentioned the students receiving an extraordinary number of divine protections, our decision to research the phenomenon with Dunkelfelger, the royal family’s participation in our Dedication Ritual, and that several graduating students had obtained new protections after repeating their protections ceremonies. The family members who had visited the Academy for the Interduchy Tournament already knew some of this, but the others were a lot more surprised.

“The newfound role that religious ceremonies play in obtaining divine protections has led the Sovereignty to reevaluate them en masse,” Sylvester announced. “Ehrenfest is at the forefront of this trend, since our archduke candidates play such an active role in our duchy’s own ceremonies. Thus, as Rozemyne will retire from her position as High Bishop upon coming of age, I am assigning Melchior to spend the next three years as an apprentice blue priest in preparation for taking her place.”

The Leisegang nobles cried out in surprise when they heard that the royal family had participated in a religious ceremony and that ceremonies as a whole were under review. They also seemed pretty accepting of another archduke candidate following in my footsteps and going to the temple; they were all wearing very bright expressions.

“Rozemyne, when am I going to the temple?” Melchior asked.

“We’ll start going together after we’ve discussed things with those in the winter playroom. Once we’ve checked the rooms in the temple and made sure there is enough space and such, we will need to select attendants to care for you.”

By the time I returned my attention to Sylvester, he had already moved on. He stated that the purged giebés were being replaced by Leisegang nobles and that they would need to undergo a three-year trial period before their new titles were finalized. This, too, was accepted with cries of joy.

“This winter, the crimes of many were exposed all at once,” Sylvester said. “Tragic though it was, I do not want this to be the end for those who were innocent but punished through association, those who resigned willingly out of tradition, or even those who committed minor crimes and have already served their punishment. My intention is to provide you all with jobs suited to your skills. Do not allow this stumble to keep you down for good; work hard to earn your status once again.”

The atmosphere in the hall seemed to relax a little—but that was quickly undone when Sylvester began to focus on the purge. He explained that, while the dangerous nobles who had given their names to the first wife of another duchy had all been targeted, some had escaped to that other duchy and remained a threat to Ehrenfest.

“The Leisegang nobles assigned as giebés are to oppose that threat,” Sylvester announced. “If you notice anything unusual or suspicious, contact the Knight’s Order at once.”

In other words, the Leisengangs would be held responsible for any failures. A sea of previously overjoyed faces hardened as they realized that life still wasn’t entirely good, even now that the former Veronica faction was destroyed.

“Furthermore, I will be taking responsibility for the entwickeln in Groschel, which will be held this autumn. I shall arrange for a more concrete discussion with the giebés of the surrounding provinces and ask for their support, such that we are not looked down upon by the merchants visiting Ehrenfest from other duchies.”

Sylvester had chosen his words wisely. Saying that we didn’t want the nobles

of top-ranking duchies to look down on us would have elicited responses of “But we’re a bottom-ranking duchy; they’re going to look down on us no matter what.” Implying that *commoner merchants* would turn their noses up was another story. Brunhilde often said that even the slightest change in phrasing could go a long way.

“As you can see, I intend to clasp hands with the Leisegang faction—to work with its nobles to lead Ehrenfest. At the same time, I wish to hire members of the younger generation to work in the castle, for they are better used to interacting with other duchies. To prove my resolve, I am taking as my second wife the daughter of Giebe Groschel. During her time serving Rozemyne as an apprentice attendant, she has contributed more than any other to dealing with the royal family and top-ranking duchies.”

At once, those of the Leisegang faction began to cheer and applaud. Some of the nobles were watching in wide-eyed surprise, but there had been such firm pressure on Sylvester to take a second wife that nobody criticized his decision.

“Brunhilde, to the stand,” Sylvester said, beckoning her over.

She glanced once in my direction, then ascended the stage with her attendant, holding her head much higher than usual and wearing a resolute expression. Her attendant was carrying a small box, which I took to mean that she had obtained a proper engagement feystone.

Brunhilde slowly knelt, then her attendant did the same and cast her eyes down. Rihyarda was carrying Sylvester’s feystone and, when she saw that Brunhilde was prepared, delicately opened up the box it was sitting in. Sylvester took the feystone from within and held it out to his bride-to-be.

“O Brunhilde, daughter of Giebe Groschel, chosen by Erwachlehen the God of Guidance—will you become our Flutrane, to support and heal this shaken duchy?”

Sylvester was alluding to the Goddess of Water’s duties of supporting the Goddess of Light and healing the Goddess of Earth. Ottilie had said that second wives were more often compared to minor subordinate gods, so I could only assume that Brunhilde was very highly valued. She had also said that second wives were *never* to be compared to the Goddess of Light in public; such a

privilege was reserved for first wives.

“I will assume the duty with honor,” Brunhilde said, accepting Sylvester’s feystone before offering her own. “I am here by the will of Erwachlehen the God of Guidance. Aub Ehrenfest, if you desire me as Ehrenfest’s Flutrane, then that is what I shall become. It is all by Erwachlehen’s guidance.”

Sylvester accepted the feystone from his smiling new fiancée and then offered her his hand. She took it and stood at his side.

“Thus, the engagement is formed,” Sylvester concluded.

The audience clapped and shone their schtappes in celebration. Of course, I did the same.

Please let Brunhilde find happiness in this union...

“Ah!”

All of a sudden, a blessing shot out of me that was a little too bright. It seemed that I’d prayed too much.

“Rozemyne!”

“It’s fine, Wilfried. It won’t stand out that much.”

“Of course it will.”

I rushed to put away my schtappe and tried to look innocent, but all the nobles looking my way suggested that Wilfried was right. My shoulders slumped—this had only happened because it was harder for me to control my schtappe now—but Philine gave me a comforting smile.

“This is an auspicious day for one of your retainers, Lady Rozemyne. That you would grant her a blessing was well within our expectations. This much is more than acceptable.”

“Philine is right,” Judithe added. “That was a far cry from the pillars of light we saw in the Royal Academy and nothing at all compared to giving a random blessing during class. Everyone will forget about this in no time!”

For some reason, their words didn’t console me at all. It felt more like their weirdness sensors were completely busted.

“If given the chance, I believe you could have filled the entire grand hall with your light,” Hartmut said. “Clarissa and I would be over the moon if you could follow your heart and grant us an overflowing blessing during our Starbind Ceremony.”

Now I’m worried about Hartmut and Clarissa’s Starbinding!

Touring the Temple

It was the day of our tour, and our highbeasts soared through the air in single file as we made our way to the temple. The children from the playroom were chatting away in my Pandabus; they were going to experience life in the temple before we asked them to choose between living there and in the castle and Melchior decided whom he wanted to serve as his temple attendants.

We had with us the four children who had been left in the playroom—two boys and two girls, with Nikolaus being among them. The parents of one of the girls had been executed, while the parents of the other children wouldn't return from their punishments for years to come.

Incidentally, the parents who had only been lightly punished had already retrieved their children. Far more were taken back from the playroom than from the temple.

In this world, pre-baptism children sure are treated differently...

"This is the temple," I said upon our arrival at the front entrance. "Everyone, do step out. You've been behaving excellently so far."

Inside my Pandabus, the seating arrangement was as follows: Judithe and Leonore at the front, then Melchior and a guard knight behind them, then the playroom children, then Cornelius and Damuel at the very back. We had used Schutzaria's shield before leaving to confirm that nobody held any malice, but even so, the guard knights had been adamant about keeping a close watch over the children. That was their job, so I was letting them do as they liked.

"Your highbeast is so cool, Rozemyne," Melchior said. "I've never seen one get so big. I want one just like it."

"I would love for us to have matching highbeasts," I replied, but that only made his retainers grimace.

"Lord Melchior..." one said, clearly uncomfortable. "Gruns are, um..."

“As the son of the aub, tradition dictates that you must use a *lion* as your highbeast,” another added.

The scholar and attendant who had been riding their own highbeasts put them away. Meanwhile, everyone else marched out of Lessy. I watched the children gazing up at the temple out of the corner of my eye as I went over to Hartmut, who was clad in blue robes, and my temple attendants.

“Preparing for today must have been quite the ordeal,” I said. “I greatly appreciate your efforts, Hartmut.”

He gave a bright smile. “I am glad to have been of use to you, Lady Rozemyne. After discussing matters with the temple attendants and considering what would be safest, we have decided to show them to the chambers of not the High Bishop but the High Priest. I intend to serve as their guide, so you may dismiss your highbeast and change clothes in the meantime.”

Grateful that Hartmut was taking care of showing our visitors around, I checked to make sure that everyone had gotten out of my Pandabus, then morphed it back into a feystone. After that, I went with Fran, Zahm, and Monika to the High Bishop’s chambers. Damuel and Leonore accompanied us as guards, while my other retainers took the job of guiding Melchior’s group and looking after the children. Judithe and Philine were great at handling kids, maybe because they both had younger brothers.

“Back at last,” I said. “It’s been some time; has the temple changed in my absence?”

Fran and the others replied with their usual peaceful expressions. The tension immediately drained from my shoulders, and the muscles in my face, weary from the fake smiles I constantly needed to wear in the castle, started to feel more at ease.

“The High Bishop’s chambers are the same as always,” Fran reported. “The orphanage, on the other hand, has changed quite considerably as a result of all the new children.”

I nodded, at which point Monika added with a smile, “Wilma is there now, preparing to welcome everyone. Nicola has also made sweets for our guests, as per Lord Hartmut’s instructions.”

“That must have been difficult, since neither Hugo nor Ella is here...” I replied. I was only visiting the temple for this tour, so my personal chefs had stayed behind in the castle.

“She made parue cakes, as I understand it, so it was very manageable for her alone. The parues were supplied to us by Gunther and the orphanage children. They timed it well, since the parues go bad if not eaten quickly.”

They had gone out of their way to put away some parues for me, since they knew how much I enjoyed eating them. That was nice. Damuel was bound to be pleased too, considering that he looked forward to parue cakes each winter.

“Gil and Fritz finished their work for the morning and directed those in the orphanage to clean the temple,” Zahm said. “The gray priests will also be gathered in the orphanage by the time everyone arrives.”

“Thank you, Zahm.”

From there, I got Monika to help me change clothes. It had been quite some time since I last donned the High Bishop’s robes.

“Monika, would you invite the Merchant’s Guild and the Plantin and Gilberta Companies here three days from now?” I asked. “There is an urgent matter we must discuss.”

“As you will,” she replied while dressing me. “It would be wise to have the Gilberta Company alter these robes. The hem comes up much higher than before.”

On closer examination, she was right. The hem had originally been tailored to go down past my shins, but now it sat just below my knees.

Yes! Yesss! I’m growing so much taller!

This was the first time I’d ever seen such a clear indicator of my growth. It was probably the result of the jureve melting away all of my mana clumps—or was it because I wasn’t compressing my mana anywhere near as much anymore? Either way, I was happy.

Once I was changed, I went to the High Priest’s chambers with Fran and the others. Melchior’s guard knight was standing in front of the door for some

reason, but he let us through without issue.

“Why is Melchior’s guard knight stationed outside?” I asked.

“Because I said that I would guard the inside,” Angelica replied, then made a show of standing in front of the inside of the door as if proving that she was doing her job. I could imagine she had declared that she would take up her usual position, leaving Melchior’s guard knight with no choice but to stand outside on his own.

To be honest, it seemed more logical to have Melchior’s guard knight standing inside, in sight of his lord, while they were both still unfamiliar with the layout of the temple—but, if everyone else was fine with this arrangement, then so was I.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Nicola said. “We are serving parue cakes today.”

A sweet aroma tickled my nose while Nicola and Lothar brought in parue cakes. The familiar scent was sheer heaven. I took in Nicola’s gleaming smile, allowing its radiance to heal my soul, while Ymir pulled my chair back for me. Then, the very moment I sat down, Fran, Monika, and Hartmut’s attendants began preparing tea.

The children were all staring at the parue cakes, overflowing with anticipation, but Melchior’s retainers were carefully watching the work of the temple attendants. I smiled, recalling how Brunhilde had shot appraising looks every which way.

“Well trained, aren’t they?” I said. “Hartmut’s and my attendants were all trained by Lord Ferdinand. My retainers also watched them carefully at first to see how much gray priests are capable of.”

Melchior’s retainers looked up with a start, then their expressions softened a little. “It certainly is remarkable,” one said. It seemed that Fran and the others had earned their approval.

Hartmut gave a slight smile and gazed at his attendants. “I was surprised at first too. It was because of how carefully Lord Ferdinand trained them that I could perform my temple duties without getting lost. I plan to assign one of my

attendants to Lord Melchior so that his scholars can learn. Lothar, if you would.”

“Understood,” came a voice, then a man stepped forward. “My name is Lothar.” I remembered him as the calmest of all the attendants who had once served Ferdinand. As far as I was concerned, he was a perfect fit for working with Melchior.

“For his other attendants,” Hartmut continued, “we will turn to the orphanage. It would be wise to choose from among those who once served blue priests. They already know the expectations for serving nobles and would require no training in that regard. On top of that, they also know about life in the temple, the yearly religious ceremonies, and the facilities in the noble section.”

The children weren’t paying attention at all and were instead staring longingly at the sweets, acting as though this had nothing to do with them. I called out to them and noted that, if they ended up living in the temple, they would need to pick attendants as well.

“Aren’t our attendants in the temple supposed to keep an eye on us?” Nikolaus asked, blinking in surprise. “Should we really be picking them ourselves?”

I nodded. “Your attendants will report on how your lives are going and whether you’ve gotten sick or some such—but, as you are going to be spending so much time with them, it would make more sense for you to choose them yourselves, would it not?”

It was outright painful needing to spend time with an attendant who wasn’t on your wavelength. As someone who had gone from being a commoner to having many attendants, I understood that fact better than most.

The kids stared up at me, at least somewhat interested in the idea of picking their own attendants. Back when I’d first met them in the playroom, they had all been staring at their feet, looking so lifeless that it had actually concerned me. All the children around them had returned to their families, whereas they had lost their parents and their futures as nobles. It was nice to see them looking a little more positive.

“Here you are, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Thank you, Fran. That looks delicious. Everyone, this is a parue cake, a sweet that can only be found in the temple during winter. It is made from parues harvested by those of the orphanage and the lower city.”

I sipped my tea, then took a bite of the parue cake so that the others could start eating too. Well, the only ones actually sitting down with me were Hartmut, Melchior, and the playroom children; Melchior’s and my retainers were awaiting the leftovers.

Aah, it’s been so long! How I love parue cakes!

Because I hadn’t returned to Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual, this was likely the only chance I would get to eat parue cakes this year. The flavor reminded me of the lower city, which I was more nostalgic for than anything else.

I wonder how Mom and Dad are doing...

“These taste so good,” Melchior remarked.

“Don’t they?” I replied. “As I said, winter is the only time we can have them. Parues go bad almost immediately after it gets warm out, so my attendants stored some in the ice room for when I returned and could eat them.”

Melchior held the most status of all our guests, so only after he gleefully dug in did the other children begin reaching for parue cakes. They were all doing their best to appear elegant... but I could see how quickly they finished their sweets.

“Nicola,” I said, “we don’t have much time on our hands, so tell the retainers to take turns eating now, while we have the chance. Damuel is particularly fond of parue cakes, so please give him a few extra.”

At once, Hartmut raised an eyebrow at me. “Lady Rozemyne, Damuel and Cornelius ate parue cakes during the Dedication Ritual. There is no need to give them special treatment.”

“Oh my. They enjoyed them without me? Then give them the same amount as everyone else.” I had considered it a shame that Damuel would only have

this one chance to eat them, but this new information changed things.

Damuel stiffened and then glared at Hartmut. “You said those were a reward for helping with the Dedication Ritual, didn’t you?”

“Do you not consider it arrogant to accept special treatment from Lady Rozemyne after having already received a reward from me?”

I sipped my tea, resolved to leave them to their squabbling. Fran had given me the blend that Ferdinand enjoyed most, and the strong aroma took me back.

Though I can’t imagine these chambers were this full of chatter when Ferdinand was the High Priest...

“Lady Rozemyne,” Nikolaus began, clenching his fists and pressing them against his lap as if expecting to get yelled at. “You are...”

“Yes, Nikolaus?”

“You are my elder sister, correct?”

“Indeed. You are my paternal half-sibling.”

Cornelius tried to interrupt, saying my name in a very low voice, but I chose to ignore him. I was only speaking the truth.

“I am the aub’s adopted daughter,” I continued. “I am forbidden from treating even Cornelius and Lamprecht, my full siblings, as brothers in public. Thus, I cannot show you any favoritism either. I imagine Cornelius would be none too pleased.”

Cornelius and Nikolaus both gave me looks of relief.

“I’m glad you understand,” Cornelius said.

“So you *do* think of me as family...” Nikolaus muttered at the same time. He had worried that, because we had never so much as spoken before and our mothers were on such bad terms, I was rejecting him completely. “I assumed you would not even tolerate my speaking to you, but I’m glad to hear that you don’t hate me.”

Nikolaus gave a shy smile while gazing down at me; he was taller than I was,

despite being my younger brother. Getting along with him like this was actually kind of nice—but, as I smiled back, I noticed that Cornelius was giving me a very stern look.

Aah! That look speaks volumes! “Don’t be soft on him just because he’s younger than you”!

By using Schutzaria’s shield, we had already confirmed that Nikolaus didn’t mean us any harm. It seemed that Cornelius was still on guard against him, though.

“Lady Rozemyne, regarding our plans for later, I believe it would be best to check the rooms *before* going to the orphanage. I expect Lord Melchior’s attendants are more concerned about that matter than anything else.”

I turned my attention away from Nikolaus. There were a lot of decisions that could only be made *after* seeing the rooms, so of course that was a priority for attendants who desperately needed to make furniture arrangements.

“Then we shall do just that,” I said.

“Furthermore,” Hartmut continued, “I have successfully arranged for Frietack’s return. Please secure his attendants so that they are not taken by anyone else.”

“Thank you and well done. Splendid work as always.”

Hartmut’s negotiations with Sylvester had worked in our favor, which was great to hear. Frietack’s return would make our administrative work here in the temple a little easier. Even performing Spring Prayer was going to be difficult with so few blue priests.

After our meal, we immediately began touring the rooms. I stepped out into the hallway and pointed at the doors around the High Priest’s chambers.

“These rooms are used by blue priests from archnoble houses,” I said, then headed to one door in particular. “This is planned to be Melchior’s room. Under normal circumstances, it would be best to clear the High Priest’s chambers for him, but we require the space while we have so many people working here. Melchior will move into the High Bishop’s chambers once the handover is

complete, while his most suitable retainer will take over as High Priest and use the High Priest's chambers. In the meantime, however, I ask that you make do with what we can provide."

"Right."

We had chosen this room for Melchior because it was the largest one available, not including the High Bishop's and High Priest's chambers, and was in close proximity to plenty of empty rooms, which would be convenient for when his retainers slept here overnight.

Melchior's attendants accepted my reasoning and started measuring the exact dimensions of the room. While the adults discussed the beds and the placement of the desk, among other things, the children gazed around curiously—it was rare to see a room that was completely empty.

"Now, let us proceed to the other rooms," I said, leaving Zahm to look after Melchior's attendants while I moved everyone else along. "Those for the girls are up this stairway by the front entrance. There are gendered spaces here, much like in the castle and the Royal Academy."

The temple even had separate stairs for boys and girls. I'd never actually visited the blue shrine maidens' rooms before now, since I'd moved straight from the orphanage director's chambers to the High Bishop's chambers and thus never had a reason to, but I wasn't going to reveal that fact.

"Nikolaus," I said a short while later as our tour continued elsewhere, "over here is where you are going to stay." As an archnoble, he normally would have been given a room in the northernmost part of the temple, but guard knights who didn't trust him were going to be frequenting the area around the High Bishop's and High Priest's chambers, as well as Melchior's room. Thus, somewhere on the border between the archnobles and mednobles seemed best.

I continued, "Everyone else will take rooms to the south. The size of the room that you stay in will depend on the funding that you receive from your house. They should suffice, since you have not yet begun to attend the Royal Academy."

Fran opened the door to a room that still contained the furniture from its

previous blue priest occupant. It was ready to be used pretty much as soon as two or three attendants were chosen from the orphanage and a chef was hired.

One of the girls looked around and asked, “Can we bring furniture from our own rooms here?” It seemed that years had passed since this room was last occupied, so most of the furnishings were neglected and scratched. I didn’t see that as much of an issue, but these children who had been born and raised as nobles thought otherwise.

“You can,” I replied, “assuming that you have people who will move it for you. The aub will need to give his permission for any furniture that has been confiscated, but I can make such requests for you.”

The children cast their eyes down, likely because they didn’t know whether their furniture would be sent over. Had there been any adults willing to help them, the kids likely wouldn’t have been left in the playroom to begin with.

“After you enter the temple and don your blue robes,” I said, “you will awake each morning and eat in your rooms, then go to the orphanage to study. We have resources that cover the first few years of the Royal Academy’s written lessons, and my musician will teach you as well.”

From there, I mentioned that the pre-baptism children were working hard to be baptized as nobles. “To be honest, their position is far less stable than your own. They might not end up being treated as nobles, yet they are still doing their best in the orphanage. Some of them may even be your younger siblings.”

A few of the kids shot their heads up. Perhaps that had rung a bell.

“Now, let us go to the orphanage,” I said, already leading the way. “Seeing the pre-baptism children should help you to understand what life is like here. Plus, Melchior needs to select his temple attendants.”

“Lady Rozemyne,” one of the girls gingerly said, “might I also pick some attendants while we’re at the orphanage? If we are allowed to study here, I would rather live in the temple than the castle. My big brother told me that everyone studies together in the Royal Academy and receives good grades, which earns them praise from the professors and recipes for new sweets. I am sincerely looking forward to going there myself.”

Hearing about the collaborative atmosphere in the Royal Academy had inspired this girl to live in the temple with the other kids, it seemed.

“I feel the same,” Nikolaus said, “though having time to train for knighthood would make this even better...”

“You are sure to have opportunities to train with my guard knights while I am here, though I cannot guarantee anything aside from that...” I said. The gray priests hadn’t exactly trained to become apprentice guard knights, so trying to fit something like that into their daily schedule wouldn’t be easy. I contemplated how best to resolve this, conscious that I hadn’t really done that kind of training either.

Cornelius shook his head, wearing a look of thorough displeasure. “Nikolaus, shouldn’t you be staying in the castle? Trudeliede wouldn’t like you living here in the temple. She’d probably start complaining to Mother again.”

Nikolaus seemed troubled as he replied, “She bothers me as much as she does any of you.” Then, he turned to me for help.

“Cornelius,” I said, “as Father is too busy to take him in, Nikolaus should get to choose whether he lives in the castle or the temple. Schutzaria’s shield was able to alleviate your immediate suspicions, was it not?”

“I don’t know...” he muttered, averting his eyes in a show of annoyance. Even now that Nikolaus had proven he felt no malice toward us, everyone assured me he was dangerous. Still, I wanted to hear him out while we had this opportunity to speak face-to-face.

“I am not asking to take Nikolaus as a retainer,” I said. “My request is merely that he be allowed to choose where he lives. I realize that it may be hard to consider a noble child separately from his parents, but I think we are fine to treat Nikolaus as an individual with his own thoughts and intentions, at least while he is here in the temple.”

Yes, it was possible that Trudeliede would complain about her son’s move to the temple, but we could always silence her by saying that she was to blame for committing the crimes that had put him in this situation to begin with.

My firm appeal made Nikolaus loosen up a little, but Cornelius just rubbed his

forehead. “Your mindset is admirable, but this is very likely to end with you taking him as a temporary retainer at the Royal Academy—much like your arrangement with Theodore.”

Oh... I didn't think of that.

“You’re very smart, Cornelius,” I said. “The idea hadn’t even occurred to me.”

Cornelius clapped a hand over his mouth in shock, while Leonore gave him a few comforting pats on the shoulder.

After leaving the noble section of the temple, the orphanage came into sight. Fran and the others opened the door and guided us into the dining hall, where my attendants Wilma, Fritz, and Gil were all kneeling. Behind them were the gray priests and shrine maidens of the orphanage, also on their knees, and even farther back were the apprentices and pre-baptism children.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” they said. “Lord Melchior, we have been awaiting your arrival.”

It seemed a lot busier here than usual. There were plenty more children around the same age as Dirk and Konrad—likely those sent here as a result of the purge—and more gray priests and shrine maidens because of the blue priests who had returned to their homes. Seeing them all made me realize the true scale of the purge.

“To think there are all these people in the orphanage...” Melchior murmured.

“There weren’t as many here before,” I replied in a quiet voice. “It just goes to show how many blue priests we lost. Not to mention, more children came this winter...” I stepped forward to address my attendants. “Wilma, Gil, Fritz—thank you for summoning everyone.”

As the person in charge of mobilizing the priests, Hartmut took over from there. He said that we were here to select attendants for Melchior and the children who would soon be joining the temple as blue priests, then looked their way with a dazzling smile.

“Select at least one former attendant with experience serving a blue priest,” he said. “Otherwise, you may choose from anyone who has been baptized.

Those here at the orphanage are well trained and quick to learn new duties. You may even select those of your age to be your apprentice attendants.”

Melchior looked at the crowd of gray robes, his eyes brimming with curiosity.

Hartmut continued, “Lord Melchior, you may pick five. Everybody else, pick three, including someone who can help to cook your meals. We will start by gathering together those who already have experience serving as an attendant. Gil, Fritz.”

Gil and Fritz did as instructed, after which Hartmut began handpicking the most ideal candidates from among the gray priests and shrine maidens. Using his perspective as a noble, he divided all those with attendant experience into two groups, left and right, then told the former to stand down.

“Those still standing before you have worked assiduously here in the orphanage, never showing even a trace of dissatisfaction about having lost their place beside a blue priest,” Hartmut explained. “They have sharp eyes and always consider the needs of others. I am sure they will serve even a young lord with great diligence.”

Some of the gray priests and shrine maidens had apparently complained about needing to work in the orphanage again and taken their frustration out on others. I was surprised to hear that.

“I never realized just how much Hartmut knows about the orphanage,” I muttered.

Philine overheard me and giggled. “He visited more than anyone and remained in close contact with your attendants. Dirk and Konrad really admire him, and he uses their youthful perspectives to gather information. It seems they state their opinions without any reservations.”

Damuel added in a whisper, “Hartmut’s good relationship with the gray priests and shrine maidens might seem innocent enough, but you should remember that he views them all in terms of how they would perform as your attendants, Lady Rozemyne. His grading is very harsh.”

Roderick nodded, then said that Hartmut was just as harsh when grading his fellow retainers. It seemed that his excellence made others fearful at times like

this.

Nikolaus carefully listened to Hartmut while waiting for Melchior to make his first choice. Meanwhile, the gray priests and shrine maidens without attendant experience waited in place, motionless, surprised and scared about Hartmut's ruthless selection process.

"Wilma, summon the pre-baptism children," I instructed.

At once, the children too young to be taken as attendants were lined up. As well as Dirk and Konrad, there were the new faces who had joined this winter. I watched out of the corner of my eye as Philine and Konrad met one another's gaze, and then—

"Brother!"

One of the children had cried out in surprise, and following the boy's eyes led me straight to Laurenz. "Is that your younger brother, Laurenz?" I asked.

"Yes, my lady. We only share a father, but my mother planned to take him in for his baptism, since his own mother passed away." Seeing the warm smile on Laurenz's face as he looked at the boy—Bertram—reminded me that he had welcomed the orphanage arrangement for saving his younger brother.

"Once we are done here, you may speak with him at your leisure," I said.

Next, I asked the children how their studies were going and whether anything troubling had happened over the winter. They responded in slightly quavering voices that they were getting better at karuta and playing cards. As it turned out, some were even managing to beat Dirk and Konrad, who had utterly trounced them at the start.

"They have been very dedicated to their harspiel practice as well," Wilma said. "I am their only music tutor at the moment, but once you properly return to the temple, they will also have Rosina to guide them."

She went on to tell me what practice she was doing with the especially skilled children. I was pleased to hear that even those who had initially struggled with the temple's lifestyle had managed to adapt.

"Dirk and Konrad served as fine examples for the other children and offered

help to those who needed it,” Wilma added.

“I see. Dirk, Konrad, thank you both.” I praised their efforts, then promised to give them parue cakes later. We had some left over from our tea party.

“Do share with Delia and Lily as well,” Wilma said to me. “They have been doing more to look after all these new children than anyone else.”

I turned to look at the two girls, who were standing farther back. Neither of them could be chosen as attendants—Delia because she was forbidden from leaving the orphanage and Lily because her child had yet to be baptized.

“I am grateful to you both as well,” I said. “Please enjoy the parue cakes with Dirk and Konrad.”

“We are honored.”

After hearing how things had gone over the winter, I addressed the gathered children. “I come bearing some good news. Five of you are going to be returned to your parents, at their request, and they will come to pick you up soon.”

I called out the names of the five children, and their faces lit up with glee. All the other kids immediately deflated, crestfallen.

“That is not all,” I said. “The aub has a message for those of you who remain: he will meet each of you in the autumn and decide then whether you are to be treated as nobles. Those who receive his approval will be baptized in the winter. This is not how you hoped things would go, I am sure, but please work hard so that you may become nobles.”

“Understood!” exclaimed Laurenz’s little brother, Bertram, unmistakably determined. I could guess from his height and speech that he was close to his baptism ceremony, and the look in his eyes made it clear that he was resolved to live as a noble.

The other kids raised their heads as well, seemingly inspired.

“That is all from me,” I concluded. “Perhaps you could show me the fruits of your studies while Melchior and the others are picking their attendants. Laurenz, Philine, you may speak with your little brothers.”

I took my retainers to the corner with books, toys, and instruments while

Laurenz and Philine went to their siblings. Matthias and the others who were visiting the orphanage and temple for the first time widened their eyes at the lined-up harspiels.

“There are this many harspiels in the orphanage?” Matthias asked.

“We retrieved them from the children’s various estates so that they could practice before their debuts,” I replied. “This is my first time seeing them all together as well.”

There were ten small harspiels lined up on a tall shelf, which made the corner feel a lot like the music room of an elementary school. They were probably being kept just out of reach so that the little children wouldn’t mess with them.

“The harspiels aren’t the only surprise,” he continued. “Although there aren’t any textbooks on them, the bookshelves here look the same as the ones in the Royal Academy.”

“Those textbooks are important, but yes—these shelves are impressive, are they not? You might also notice the book of commoner stories that we made when testing the printing press.”

The stories from around Groschel that Lutz and Gil had compiled into a book had a very unique appeal compared to those sold to nobles. And since the book wasn’t for sale, most nobles couldn’t read them.

“Do give it a look if you’re curious,” I said. “You might find it entertaining to glimpse what life is like for the commoners.”

In the blink of an eye, Muriella poked her head out from behind Matthias. “As I will be participating in the printing industry henceforth, I shall take you up on that offer, Lady Rozemyne.” Then, her green eyes sparkling in wonderment, she fluttered over to the bookshelf. She was an avid lover of romance stories, so I had to wonder if she would take to tales from the lower city.

If nobles actually do like commoner stories, that should dramatically expand the kinds of books I can print. Fingers crossed.

As my mind wandered, I took in the melody of the children strumming their harspiels and watched some of the others read.

After playing a few more notes, one of the girls playing harspiel stopped and gazed somberly at the children selecting their attendants. “Why is my big brother not joining us in the orphanage?” she asked, almost certainly referring to the boy who wasn’t Nikolaus.

“He has already been baptized as a noble, meaning that simply isn’t an option for him,” I explained. “That said, he will be staying in the temple as an apprentice blue priest. When you next get a chance, be sure to tell him all about your studies and how your life has been here.”

“Oh...”

I understood why she wanted them to live together as siblings, but there was a stark difference between those who were baptized as nobles and children yet to be baptized at all. They could come together to study in the orphanage, but that was about it; the orphans were forbidden from going to the noble section of the temple.

It would have been easy to make an exception for siblings, but more and more nobles were going to be visiting the temple for things like meetings with merchants and the divine protections ceremony. Letting the children roam freely would be much too dangerous. As the unbaptized children of criminals, their position was as weak as my own back during my days as a commoner shrine maiden; we couldn’t predict what kinds of complaints the nobles might come up with to punish them. Thus, while living with one’s family in the temple sounded easy enough, the reality was far more complicated.

“You will get to spend time with your elder brother when everyone comes to the orphanage to study,” I assured the girl. “If you work hard and are baptized as a noble, you will be able to live with him in the noble section of the temple. Please work your hardest with that in mind.”

“Right.”

I smiled at the girl, who now had a goal to work toward... but I was actually feeling a little blue. *If working hard was all that was necessary for me to spend time with my family, I wouldn’t have any qualms about pouring my blood, sweat, and tears into whatever I needed to do.*

As I wistfully longed for a chance to at least see my family, I overheard

someone say, “I don’t believe working hard in the temple will help me as a noble.” I looked up and saw Laurenz trying to hush his younger brother.

“C’mon, Bertram!”

“Am I not right?” the boy asked. “Getting on my hands and knees to clean, drawing water from the well, putting on my own clothes, making my own bed, digging through snow in the forest in search of things to eat... None of these are things a noble should be doing.”

“Is that really what you’ve been put through...?” Laurenz muttered, giving his little brother and the other children a look of pity. Perhaps it all seemed wretched to nobles used to having attendants and being waited on hand and foot, but a simple change of perspective was enough to realize that one gained a lot of experience from living in the orphanage.

“It certainly is a struggle having to go without the help of attendants and embrace the self-sufficiency of the orphanage,” I said. “To be honest with you, were I to attempt it, I simply would not survive.”

My retainers, who knew of my poor health, all nodded in agreement. This was far from something to brag about, but I was the prime example of a person who couldn’t live without help. Yet, even then, my experiences in the lower city had been of so much use to me in noble society.

“That said,” I continued, “there *are* ways for your experiences in the orphanage to benefit you as a noble. You must find them for yourself, though.”

“What?” Bertram asked, blinking in surprise. He must not have expected anyone to disagree with him.

I smiled. “Merchants with my favor pay visits to the workshop, do they not? That gives you plenty of chances to see what products are being made, which are being sold, make connections with those merchants, and convey their words to nobles in a way that will serve both parties. If you pay close enough attention, you will realize that this place is a *wellspring* of valuable knowledge. Learn as much as you can from the merchants.”

I already knew from Benno and the others that the merchants wanted more connections to nobles with whom they could speak properly. Things were much

too unstable while I was filling that role alone, and any noble looking to improve the situation would surely have their every question answered in return.

Well, the merchants might frown a little, like when I asked them questions, but I can't imagine Benno will start grinding his fist against any of their heads. Yeah.

“Those who can learn to cooperate with merchants will secure themselves a very firm place in the Ehrenfest of tomorrow,” I declared. “Such a skill is in tremendously high demand among our scholars.”

The girl who had resolved to enter the temple as a blue shrine maiden shot us a very curious look. She probably wanted to be a scholar when she grew up.

“Furthermore,” I said, “you will receive more opportunities to visit the forest once it gets warmer outside, will you not? Summer is also when merchants from other duchies will start visiting Ehrenfest. On your way to the forest, there may be times when you overhear what those merchants desire or what they are dissatisfied with. Perhaps you might receive such information from the commoners who accompany you to the lower city. There are countless ways to make your current situation benefit your future as a noble.”

In response to my assertion, most of the surprise came not from the children but from our noble retainers. If the kids raised in this orphanage used their experience well, they could become fairly talented scholars.

“Also... Ah, yes. Would you like me to show you a secret technique that came from my temple upbringing—one that regular nobles cannot use? Perhaps seeing it will inspire you to broaden your horizons.”

I got up to demonstrate, and a familiar voice asked me what I was about to do. I turned just in time to see Hartmut, his eyes positively sparkling from where he was standing right beside me.

Wha...? How long have you been there? Weren't you helping Melchior and the others to pick attendants...?

I was taken aback, but then I saw Melchior coming over as well, looking curious. It seemed safe to assume that the selection process had just

concluded.

Well, whatever...

There was no point in thinking too hard about Hartmut's shenanigans. I asked the children to step back for safety's sake, then took out my highbeast feystone while looking at the well-cleaned, well-polished white floor.

"This is my highbeast feystone," I announced. "As you are the children of nobles, can I assume you have all seen highbeasts and know that these stones can freely change shape?"

Bertram nodded, though he appeared a little on guard.

"Observe," I said, then expanded the feystone into a balloon, much like I had once done with Ferdinand. My control over my mana was now good enough that I could pop it without firing shards all over the place, so that was what I did. The feystone broke apart into chunks, which dropped to the floor like puzzle pieces.

"Your highbeast feystone!"

"How will we get back to the castle now?!"

Paying no attention to the children's surprise, I gathered together the scattered pieces, channeled my mana into them, and chanted, "Ball up! Ball up!" Then, with my chest puffed out, I presented the feystone to everyone in its original, spherical glory.

"What? It's... back to normal?"

"That can't be..."



As the nobles cried out in shock—similarly to how Ferdinand had called my little stunt unnatural—I smiled at Bertram. “Dried-out clay will merely crumble apart in your hands if you try to roll it all together, but add water and it becomes soft and malleable. In a similar sense, it becomes possible to re-form a feystone if you channel mana into it and squeeze the pieces together.”

“But... softening a shattered feystone shouldn’t be possible...”

The nobles stared at my re-formed feystone as though they couldn’t believe their eyes. But, well, we didn’t have the same common sense; what was impossible to them was possible to me.

“The important part is to *visualize* moving the mana,” I said. “Do not limit yourself to what you *think* is possible. Anything that you do here might prove useful one day, be it touching the earth, putting on your clothes, or cleaning the floor. How you capitalize on these experiences is up to you.”

My retainers must have remembered my claim that experience made it easier to visualize the mana compression process; they began looking around the orphanage as if searching for hints.

“Seems you’re gonna have more fun here than you would living as a regular noble,” Laurenz said, patting his little brother on the back. “Good luck, Bertram.”

Bertram responded only with a nod. Although he didn’t seem entirely convinced, I at least got the feeling that he would make his every experience here useful in one way or another.

“Rozemyne, I want to have lots of experiences too,” Melchior said, a glint in his indigo eyes. “I want to have loads of talents like you. It’s so amazing how you can do things that nobody else can.”

I smiled at him. “Most other nobles are lacking experience in the temple, so you may use your time here to the fullest.” Going to the temple meant traveling through farming towns for ceremonies, so he was sure to have many interesting experiences.

“Right!”

Melchior's enthusiasm despite being a member of the archducal family seemed to make the other children more optimistic about their new life in the temple and their upcoming experiences. But as I was enjoying the satisfaction of having raised their spirits, Damuel leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Lady Rozemyne, I struggle to see why that display cheered them up. They won't be able to re-form feystones without having an enormous mana capacity."

"Damuel! Shh!"

The children had selected their attendants and would be accepted as apprentice blue-robos after Spring Prayer. In the meantime, their attendants discussed setting up rooms for whomever they were serving. Talk of chefs and food would need to wait until after a meeting with Benno and Freida.

Hartmut, the High Priest, looked across the newly chosen attendants. "All of you will be making preparations for your new lord or lady. I will provide instructions for their education as blues at a later date. They will start visiting the orphanage after Spring Prayer and under Lord Melchior's leadership, though worry not—my own frequent visits have already paved the way for you."

He seems kind of proud about that last part, but blue priests aren't really supposed to visit the orphanage so often.

I had always been hoping for the culture in the orphanage and among the blue priests to change, and it seemed to be happening faster than I ever thought. Back when I'd first started going to the orphanage as an apprentice blue shrine maiden, I was pretty sure it hadn't been a place where an archduke candidate could show up at will. Still, Melchior's retainers seemed to have an entirely different view of the temple now—and, as I hoped that these positive changes would continue, Hartmut began his last farewell.

"Let us offer our prayers to the mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, the mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, Flutrane the Goddess of Water, Leidenschaft the God of Fire, Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth, Ewigeliebe the God of Life, and finally Lady Rozemyne,

the Saint of Ehrenfest.”

“Praise be to the gods!”

The gray priests and shrine maidens shot their arms and right leg up in prayer. Even the children who had only entered the temple this winter performed the gesture without the slightest hesitation. Meanwhile, those who were completely new to the temple—Matthias, Laurenz, Melchior’s retainers, and the children of the playroom—looked slightly repulsed.

Wait, what was that last part?

Hartmut had delivered the prayer so naturally that I’d paid the words no mind, but now that I thought about it... had he included my name among those of the gods? I was overcome with the sudden urge to shout, “What’s the meaning of this?!” and interrogate him... but we were in full view of so many people.

In the end, I took my leave without a word of protest—though there was nothing I could do to keep my forced smile from twitching.

Preparing the Ritual

After returning to the castle and gathering with everyone for dinner, I reported the summary of our tour to Sylvester, then inquired about budgets and moving furniture. Our discussion proceeded without incident—as expected, since he generally gave permission for everything I asked.

“The temple is ready to accept Melchior and the other children,” I said, “but there is still a mountain of problems to deal with.”

“Such as?”

“We lack the manpower for Spring Prayer. Ferdinand is gone, and Melchior is still too young to be of any use.”

We had yet to make up for losing Ferdinand—a loss so great that my guard knights had needed to participate in our duchy’s most recent Dedication Ritual—and now the purge had cost the temple many blue priests. The burden on those who remained would be immense during this year’s Spring Prayer, so planning how we were going to delegate the work was of the utmost urgency.

“There is no helping that Melchior has not yet learned to channel mana, but something needs to be done,” I said.

The original plan had been for Melchior to begin his practice during last year’s Archduke Conference so that he could assist us with this year’s Spring Prayer—but, during that same Archduke Conference, Ferdinand and Detlinde’s engagement had been announced.

How had the engagement ended up affecting Melchior? Well, Ferdinand had spent his remaining time in Ehrenfest educating me and preparing his successors, which meant he had seldom left the temple or contributed mana to the foundation. This reduced supply of mana had forced the archducal family to work overtime, so Florencia and Bonifatius had been too busy supplying the foundation to support Melchior. On top of that, everyone’s schedule had more or less exploded when the purge occurred earlier than expected.

And, of course, Florencia's pregnancy had then necessitated that Melchior be moved to the northern building.

"Charlotte had an entire season to practice before her first Spring Prayer," I noted, "but it still ended up being a struggle for her. It would be outright dangerous for Melchior when he has no prior experience to rely on."

"But I really want to participate this year..." Melchior interjected, clearly vexed.

Sylvester and Florencia exchanged troubled looks. After everything that had happened over the past year, they had both been much too busy to help their son prepare.

"It may not be feasible for you to practice supplying mana to the castle foundation," I said to Melchior, "but you can practice offering up mana in the temple. If you take it seriously, you should be ready to join us next year." Having him participate this year was entirely out of the question.

I continued, "As you know, for Spring Prayer, the giebe-ruled provinces are given chalices and nothing else; we are not required to perform religious ceremonies for them as we do for the farming towns of the Central District. No gray priests are required, so we could solve our manpower problem by sending my retainers to the various provinces instead. The only issues are that the bulk of my adult retainers are guard knights and those who are still underage cannot leave the city..."

"For obvious reasons, we can't risk cutting back on your knights," Sylvester said.

I nodded. That was clear to anyone, and it was the greatest fault with my idea. Cornelius had mentioned it when I brought this up before.

"We can throw money at most of our problems," I said. "The carriages, food, chefs, attendants, and ceremonial robes—a few simple payments can take them off our minds. But nothing can be done about our lack of manpower."

Wilfried, who had been listening in silence, suddenly looked up. "What if Charlotte and I go from province to province with the remaining blue priests while Hartmut and you circle the Central District?"

“What?” I replied. “But... you and Charlotte are busy enough, are you not? The process might only involve visiting the giebes and giving them chalices, but it takes several days and can be physically draining. Since the temple has been entrusted to me, I thought it would be best for those who are already occupied to only help with the nearest parts of the Central District.”

Wilfried shrugged. “If I want the Leisegangs’ support, I’ll need to meet with them as many times as I can. Not to mention, having Charlotte and me go to those provinces will make it clear to all the nobles that we’re involved with religious ceremonies too.”

In the past, we mana-rich archduke candidates had circled the Central District to minimize travel time and improve its harvest to match those of the giebes’ provinces. This had apparently led the nobles to assume that Wilfried and Charlotte weren’t doing anything.

“The nobles have all heard about your Gutenbergs’ travels and the Haldenzel Miracle, but the only ones who know about Charlotte’s and my involvement are our retainers—and even that’s just because they accompany us. It seems to me that the Leisegangs think you’re the only one being made to perform religious ceremonies. Lamprecht mentioned as much after gathering some intelligence.”

I hadn’t noticed that at all.

I’d only elected to visit the provinces myself because my Pandabus was the most efficient way to move large groups of adults from one place to another. It hadn’t occurred to me that my efforts were making other nobles assume that I was being worked to the bone.

“I agree with Wilfried—it might be a good idea for us to visit the giebes,” Charlotte said. “We may have farther to travel as a result, but that shouldn’t be an issue when we have our highbeasts to rely on.” Like me, she had a drivable highbeast capable of transporting the chalices. That would save them a lot of time.

Wilfried nodded at her. “It might be a good idea to have the blue priests circle the Central District instead. I want to meet with as many giebes as I can.”

“Perhaps it would be best for you to focus on the south of Ehrenfest,” Charlotte suggested. “As the next archduke, you will need to greet the new,

tentative giebes.”

Wilfried paused in thought, then nodded again. “Yeah. Most of the new giebes are in the south, so I should go there and to Groschel.” It seemed that he really was focused on making connections with Leisegang nobles.

“In that case,” I said, “I will take care of the Central District. I would also like to visit Kirnberger, as I plan to take the Gutenbergs there.”

Sylvester eyed me carefully. “It won’t be easy having to give mana to all of those farming villages, but Spring Prayer has a direct impact on our harvest. There’s also our joint research with Frenbeltag... I’m counting on you, Rozemyne.”

I nodded, relieved that we had solved our problem.

“Rozemyne,” Wilfried said, “you mentioned that you’re going to be spending all of your time in the temple now, right? Could you bring the ritual for obtaining divine protections forward a little? If we can demonstrate that even adults can secure new protections by participating in religious ceremonies, then my retainers should be more open to my doing all this.”

As it turned out, his retainers had made it very clear that they didn’t want him participating in Spring Prayer; they thought it would be too dangerous for him to travel all around the duchy. Wilfried had tried to argue that it was his duty as an archduke candidate, but... to be honest, I understood where they were coming from. I, myself, had been attacked during my first Spring Prayer.

“If you are going to be in danger, then perhaps I should make some protective charms for you and Charlotte...” I mused aloud. Maybe I would give them two each: one to block a physical attack and another to block a mana attack. This would keep them safe during the start of an ambush, and their guard knights would be able to deal with things from there.

As I was considering which of the charms I was wearing would work best, Charlotte smiled at me. “Though he won’t be joining us for Spring Prayer, Melchior will surely pout if you don’t give him some charms as well.”

I turned to look at Melchior, who puffed out his cheeks and muttered, “I won’t pout...” I decided to make some charms for him too.

Sylvester clapped his hands together, trying to regain our attention. “Rozemyne, we received correspondence from Ferdinand this afternoon—he wants some of his personal belongings to be sent to Ahrensbach alongside his engagement gifts. He has asked that you oversee this request, since you have the key to his estate, but assures us that the attendant he left behind will take care of things if shown the letter. Send a scholar of yours later on.”

“Understood,” I replied. “Is Ferdinand doing well?” I couldn’t imagine that much had changed since our reunion for the Interduchy Tournament.

Sylvester frowned. “He seems fine, but... things are getting complicated over there. He’s going to be performing Ahrensbach’s Spring Prayer.”

“What?”

That didn’t make any sense. Ferdinand wasn’t yet married to Detlinde, meaning he was formally still a citizen of Ehrenfest. Not to mention, other duchies were strongly biased against the temple and religious ceremonies, so why on earth would Ahrensbach want a member of its archducal family involved in one?

“Ahrensbach is suffering a mana shortage,” Sylvester said, “but Ferdinand still can’t help to supply its foundation. This is just an assumption, but I think Aub Ahrensbach has passed away and they’ve started dyeing their foundational magics with his successor’s mana.”

Florencia, whom I could guess had already seen the letter, put a hand on her cheek and sighed. “It seems that Lady Letizia will be taking part as well. Lady Detlinde was apparently trying to make her supply the foundation directly and without practice, since she heard that our baptized archduke candidates have been providing their mana.”

“It sounds as if some very important details about our ceremonies have been misconstrued...” Charlotte said, looking worried.

Children who weren’t used to controlling their mana would struggle immensely when trying to channel it into something. They needed guidance from an adult before anything else, which was why Florencia and Bonifatius being so busy had put Melchior in such an unfortunate position. It wouldn’t have been as much of a concern if he had already started attending the Royal

Academy and learned the process there, but he still didn't know his limits and was at great risk of getting caught up in the adults' mana flow.

To minimize the danger of new participants being completely drained of mana, children were made to practice by drawing mana out of a feystone. Learning to control their mana would prevent them from passing out during actual ceremonies, but even that was exhausting for those without much experience to rely on.

Trying to make someone perform Mana Replenishment without any training can only end in disaster.

It had been impossible to predict what Detlinde might force Letizia to do while Ferdinand was absent, which was why it had been decided that Letizia would attend Spring Prayer as well. She would practice controlling her mana along the way.

"I see..." I murmured. "In that case, we should inform Lady Letizia that the kindness-filled rejuvenation potions she'll receive are *not* a cruel prank, as Wilfried and Charlotte once assumed." I was worried that she would end up hating Ferdinand, despite his good intentions—but it seemed that Wilfried was more concerned about something else.

"Rozemyne!" he exclaimed. "That's the last thing for us to be worried about! Focus on how other duchies are misunderstanding our religious ceremonies!"

I mean, you're not wrong... but most people should know from experience that supplying mana is exhausting. Few would make a little kid attempt it without any training.

Yes, few would—but that hadn't stopped Ferdinand from working me half to death for my first Spring Prayer and Dedication Ritual. All of a sudden, leaving Letizia in his care seemed extremely dangerous. His standards were completely twisted at times, maybe because of the unique circumstances of his birth, or maybe because of the unreasonable expectations that Veronica had forced upon him.

Hopefully they can stop him.

"Lady Detlinde's misunderstandings certainly are a concern," I said, "but what

concerns me more is that Lady Georgine did nothing to intervene. Sylvester, was Ferdinand told about the results of the purge?”

We had been told not to speak with other duchies about Ehrenfest’s situation and to reveal only as much as Sylvester permitted, but I had to wonder—was Ferdinand aware of the likelihood that Giebe Gerlach had survived the purge? Matthias had mentioned that one of the hidden rooms in which his father had stored magic tools had been in a complete state of disarray when he and the others carried out their investigation. Giebe Gerlach had always kept his rooms well organized for the sake of convenience—or so I was told—so it seemed that he had grabbed all of the tools he would need in a frenzy before the Knight’s Order reached his estate.

Laurenz didn’t think the state of the room was a sign of anything unusual, though. He said that, in his own hidden rooms, there isn’t even space to move around.

Matthias hadn’t been able to enter Giebe Gerlach’s most private hidden room, so the Order hadn’t been able to see inside either. Bonifatius *had* spotted some glossy silver cloth wedged in the doorframe, though. He had torn it away without a moment’s hesitation, insisting that it was very strange indeed, but nobody else had batted an eye.

“I told him a couple of things,” Sylvester said in response to my question. “He mentioned in his letter that he’ll try to see if Gerlach is with Georgine.”

“I see,” I replied. “That’s good. I’m impressed you managed to get all this past inspection.”

“We have more than a few systems in place that allow for secret communication,” he explained, then gave me a very meaningful look. “Even when you read the letter yourself, you won’t be able to decipher them.”

It seemed that I wasn’t the only one who had a secret method of communicating with Ferdinand.

After dinner, while Hartmut was busy fetching me a copy of the new letter, I took my previous letter from Ferdinand into my hidden room. It detailed the results of his research into the divine protections ritual—though it was all

written in invisible ink, meaning I would need to transcribe it before anyone else could read it. The letter mentioned that his handmade version of the magic circle was among the magic tools moved from his temple workshop to his estate and that I was free to use it as long as I sent him my findings afterward.

“Mm, well... I’m going to be sending stuff to him anyway, so it wouldn’t be too much trouble to include a letter of my results. But why is he giving me this condition in the first place? He already said that everything in his estate belongs to me now. Isn’t this a bit cruel...?”

Of course, his letter offered no room for debate. I couldn’t expect anything less from Ferdinand... and that fact brought a smile to my face.

“For him to have made a magic circle on such a large scale, without any assistance, he must have had a lot of time on his hands when he first joined the temple,” I muttered to myself. It was surely too big for a normal experiment, if the circle I’d seen at the Royal Academy was anything to go by. Only a mad scientist would have gone and made it anyway.

I came out of my hidden room and found that Hartmut had returned with a transcription of the new letter. “Thank you, Hartmut. Just so you know, I intend to go to the library tomorrow. Ferdinand wants me to look for something that he says is necessary for the divine protections ritual. He said that he experimented with it once before.”

“As one would expect from him, I suppose.”

I took the transcribed letter from Hartmut and, in turn, gave him the transcription that I had just written.

“Philine—my apologies, but could you send an ordonnanz to Brunhilde?” I asked. “Give her the date and time of our upcoming meeting with the merchants and ask her to attend. Considering its relevance to Groschel, it makes sense for her to be there, do you not think? Tell her to bring several scholars as well.”

“Understood.”

“Ottilie, Lieseleta, Gretia—after visiting the library tomorrow, I will return to the temple. This is going to be an extended stay, so please make the necessary

preparations.”

My attendants were the best of the best, so that was as much as I needed to say. They would sort out my clothes and daily necessities, contact Rosina and my chefs, and arrange for carriages to transport them.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “the Gilberta Company will soon be called to the temple to alter my ceremonial robes. I will use that opportunity to order my summer clothes as well, so please be sure to visit on the day.”

“Understood.”

As I gave out one instruction after another, I read through the letter that Sylvester’s scholar had transcribed. The section describing how Ferdinand was doing was *very* brief and contained nothing that Sylvester hadn’t already told me; the rest was a simple list of all the things that Ferdinand wanted sent to Ahrensbach. It wasn’t written in his handwriting—the scholar had transcribed it, after all—so I reached the end swiftly and without getting sentimental.

Ferdinand wrote only in extended euphemisms, but it was clear as day that Detlinde’s return from the Royal Academy was causing him all sorts of problems. Letizia’s education kept being delayed as a result.

Letizia might actually appreciate that, though; I remember her struggling to cope with Ferdinand’s intensity. Oh, but now they’re going to be together for all of Spring Prayer...

Sending her some additional sweets was going to be crucial—and so was informing her about the kindness-filled potions. I was absolutely certain that things would end poorly if she thought they were a spiteful prank.

The day after, I needed to prepare for the divine protections ritual and send Ferdinand his things. That meant accompanying everyone to my library.

My library... That had such a nice ring to it.

I giggled to myself, eyes fixed on my library—*ma bibliothèque!*—as I made a beeline to it. Of course, I hadn’t failed to bring the bag containing the praise-filled magic tool. Today would be the day I was showered with kind words.

I stood in front of the door, then grabbed the key hanging from a chain around my neck and slotted it into the keyhole. Red mana lines streaked across the door, which then opened on its own with a drawn-out creak.

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne,” said the attendant waiting on the other side. His name was Lasfam, and he was about as old as Ferdinand.

I had seen Lasfam several times before, including when we had moved the luggage here and when Detlinde had visited. He had a peaceful demeanor, a calm voice, and a strong spirit despite his reserved nature—three traits that he shared with Fran and Zahm. One could tell at a glance why Ferdinand had taken a liking to him, and he was easy to speak with because he came across as so familiar.

“It’s been a while, Lasfam,” I said. “As I mentioned in my ordonnanz to you, could I ask you to prepare Ferdinand’s belongings? The castle will deliver them alongside the gifts we send over. In the meantime, I am going to be reading in my library’s book room, searching through the workshop, reading in my library’s book room, making my hidden room, and... Have I mentioned reading in my library’s book room?”

Lasfam had already seen me being dragged out of the library by Ferdinand, my arms still desperately wrapped around a book; there was no need for me to put on a front around him.

Even if I tried to, it would crumble in the blink of an eye.

Lasfam briskly read through the letter I gave him, then looked up. “Lady Rozemyne, I must ask that you open the doors before you enter the book room.” As it turned out, there were several that only I could open as the owner of the estate, and some led to rooms containing Ferdinand’s belongings.

I did as Lasfam had instructed, then headed to the workshop—which also couldn’t be opened without me—with Hartmut and the others. The security here was impressive but also highly inconvenient; crushed were my dreams of rushing straight to the book room.

“The magic circle for the divine protections ritual is somewhere within the magic tools he brought back from the temple,” I said. “I gave the letter containing the details to Hartmut, so... search well, everyone. I am going to

make my hidden room and then delve into some books.”

As if on cue, Angelica stepped forward. “You must have a guard at all times, Lady Rozemyne—even here in your estate. I won’t be much help with finding the magic circle, so I volunteer.”

Everyone else seemed enthralled by the mass of magic tools, so Angelica was the only one to accompany me. We took our leave and started upstairs to my room.

“You know, why are the rooms for girls always on the top floor?” I wondered aloud.

“Because that’s what people expect, right?” Angelica replied. “They’d get confused if you put them somewhere else.”

I could tell that we weren’t quite on the same page, but I decided not to address it. Instead, I continued onward and entered my room. Inside was all the furniture of the previous occupant. It was pretty old but still in good condition.

This room had been used by a woman who had accompanied Ferdinand to Ehrenfest when he was brought here before his baptism. He had looked up to her as though she were his mother, but then he had been taken to the castle to prepare for his baptism. By the time Ferdinand had returned to the estate, she had vanished; he assumed that Veronica had eliminated her.

I wasn’t at all invested in buying new furniture, nor was I going to sell these relics of the past that Ferdinand clearly valued. For those reasons, I intended to leave the room largely unchanged.

To think Ferdinand saw the previous occupant of this room as a mother figure... I wonder what she was like.

“Angelica, do fetch that chair for me,” I said while making my way over to the hidden room by the bed. I registered my mana with it, then opened the door and got her to put the chair inside. Once that was done and she had come back out, I went inside and shut the door behind me.

Now alone in my hidden room, I sat on the chair, reached into the bag on my hip, and took out the sound-recording magic tool. A message from Ferdinand began to play.

“You are listening to this in the hidden room of the library I gave you, correct?” he asked.

“Of course,” I replied with a self-assured grin.

There was a pause, then Ferdinand cut to the chase. He said that Georgine had moved to her villa and vanished from sight not long after the start of winter. There were rumors that she had taken more retainers, and her servants were being watched so closely that not even Justus could slip into their ranks.

“Something must have happened during the winter,” Ferdinand continued. “There is a chance that survivors of the purge have fled to Georgine’s side. You must tell Sylvester not to lower his guard under *any* circumstances. Moreover, there are several boxes among my belongings that contain documents necessary for controlling the Leisegangs. Sylvester must learn to assuage the Leisegangs on his own, so leave the documents be for now. Bring them out only if you determine that he will not be able to manage otherwise.”

There sure are a lot of Sylvester-related warnings in this thing. How long until the part where he praises me?

I understood that this was all critical intelligence, but my hopes were so high that any disappointment would be devastating. My shoulders slumped, I continued to listen.

“Also, as a warning for you in particular...”

Enough warnings! Praise me already!

“Sylvester informed me that Ehrenfest will not be offering more business slots this year. Any duchies that take issue with this decision may become aggressive, so be wary. We are also nearing the time of year when the merchants cautiously adjusting to Ehrenfest will attempt their usual subterfuge.”

At once, I recalled the time that Klassenberg had tried to force Karin on us. Ferdinand was saying that we should expect more incidents like that going forward.

“A marriage agreed upon by both parties would not be too great an issue, but we cannot discount the prospect of merchants resorting to more violent methods. As it stands, the craftspeople you raised are generating most of the

profit in Ehrenfest, be it through printing or making hairpins. They are very likely to be targeted.”

Most of the Gutenbergs would be busy in Kirnberger, but Tuuli, our most talented hairpin craftswoman, was going to be in the lower city. As were Benno and Mark.

How can I keep them all safe...?

I couldn’t guard them at all times, and my charms required too much mana for commoners to be able to use them. The most I could do was warn them of the danger, but it seemed safe to assume that Benno and the others already understood the risks of doing business. They likely understood them even better than I did.

“For that reason,” Ferdinand continued, “I will teach you how to make protective charms that even commoners can use. Have those you care about wear them.”

From there, he launched straight into his instructions. I rushed to grab my diptych and started writing everything down. These charms for commoners were made slightly differently and using separate ingredients from those meant for nobles.

“The ingredients you will need can be found within the library’s workshop,” Ferdinand said. “And... I suppose you could use refilling the mana of these charms as an excuse to invite their recipients to the temple. Such charms will also serve as convenient gifts for celebrations, much like the hair ornament I gave you.”

I paused in thought. Tuuli was going to come of age at the end of summer, and it seemed that Ferdinand was very subtly encouraging me to use that opportunity to give her a present.

“You’re as hard to understand as ever...” I muttered, pursing my lips at the now silent magic tool. “If you had just included a few words of praise, that message would have been perfect.”

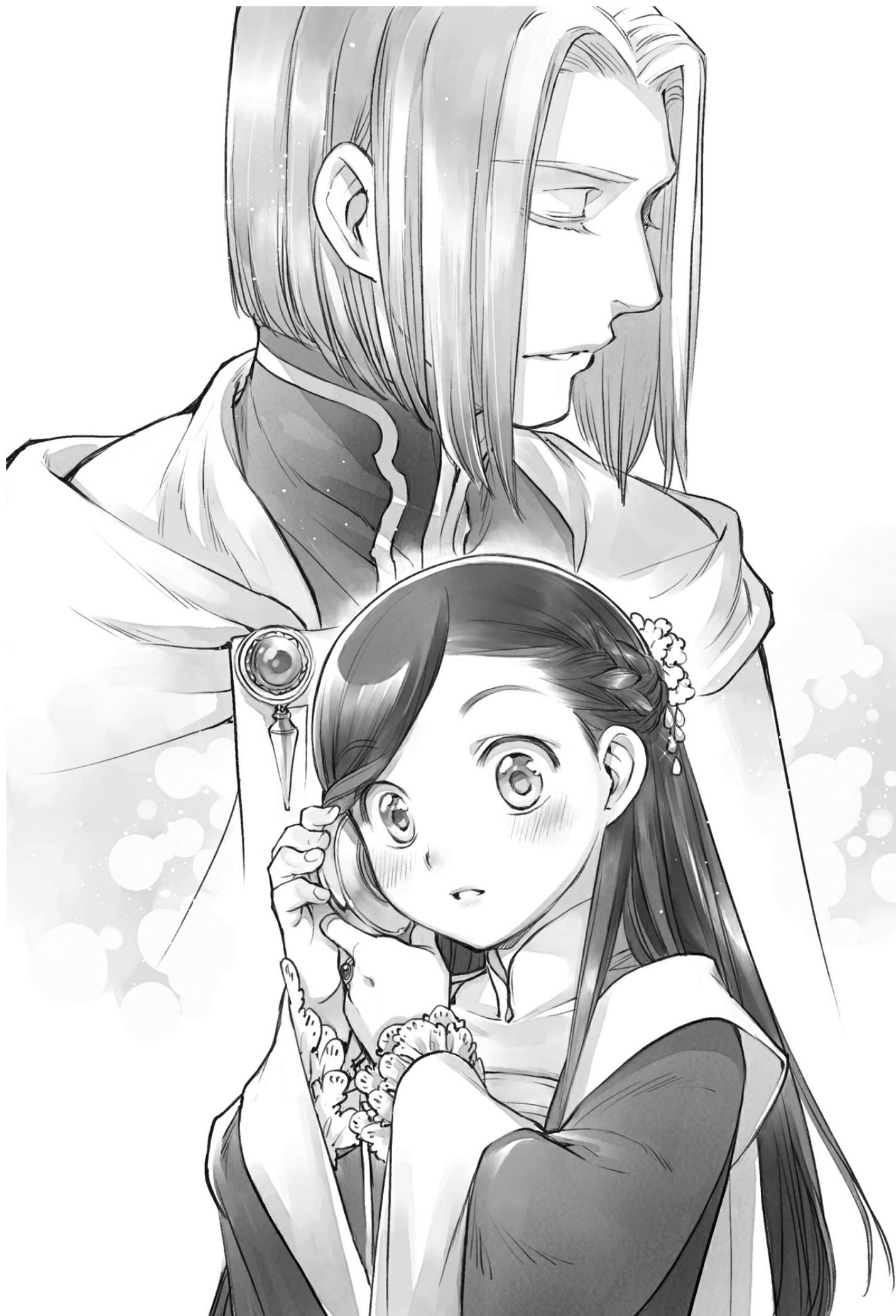
Alas, I had been a fool to expect any kind words from Ferdinand. I heaved a very disappointed sigh, but just as I went to put away the magic tool...

“I... believe you are working hard,” came his voice again.

I brought the tool back to my ear, wondering whether I’d simply misheard.
And then—

“Very good.”

Hearing those two words sent a wave of pride through me, like all of my hard work had at last been rewarded. Maybe it was because he so rarely handed out praise that it felt so meaningful.



I slid off the chair, a hand pressed against my naturally smiling face. Then, I returned the magic tool to its bag and set it down on my seat. I could relisten to those words of praise whenever I wanted.

He acknowledged my request and praised me, so I need to work hard as well.

To hear this praise again, I would need to get the results to earn it.

“Alriiiight!” I exclaimed. “Now I’m motivated. I’m gonna make charms for everyone!”

I threw open the door to the hidden room and, with a great big smile on my face, marched straight to the workshop.

Reobtaining Divine Protections

While everyone else was searching through the magic tools, I dedicated myself to making charms. I was going to need a lot of them, since I intended to give them to my lower-city family and the Gutenbergs, so I was thankful that Ferdinand was providing the materials. I would need to give the guildmaster one as well, considering that I was summoning him alongside the Gilberta and Plantin Companies.

“Okay. That should be enough for now.”

After giving up my reading time to make a bunch of charms—I was still surprised that I’d given up my reading time to begin with—I arranged for everything that was required for the divine protections ritual to be taken to the temple. The ritual itself would take place tomorrow.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Leonore said, “I repeated the ritual after graduating, so I will go to the training grounds instead of participating tomorrow.”

“As did I,” Lieseleta agreed. “For that reason, I would prefer to focus on business in the castle.”

“And what will you do, Judithe?” I asked.

“I don’t think I’ve prayed enough yet, so I’ll pass this time,” she replied. “I could go to the training grounds as well—or, if you need guards, I could still go with you to the temple.”

“I will have more than enough guards, so you may train instead. Hm... I suppose I should contact Ottilie and Brunhilde as well.”

I sent them ordonnances and received two refusals in response. Ottilie hadn’t bothered to pray enough to warrant her repeating the ritual. Brunhilde was much too busy working with Groschel and sorting out the training of attendants—not to mention, she would be repeating the ceremony after her graduation anyway.

“Well, Gretia... since you’re required to participate, don’t forget to come to

the temple,” I said.

“Understood.”

We were reasonably confident that Roderick had become omni-elemental as a result of swearing his name to me, but we didn’t yet have any concrete proof. The plan was for those who were name-sworn to perform their rituals after the adults.

I wonder if Mother will come...

If she did, we would be able to investigate whether changing whom a person was sworn to would impact the divine protections they received. Muriella would need to repeat the ritual again, but we really needed the data.

I sent an ordonnanz to Elvira, asking what her schedule was like. She replied that she would have some time in the afternoon. “I shall accept a new sweets recipe in return,” she added teasingly. “Now that Cornelius has graduated, I no longer have a means of obtaining them.”

It was decided, then: I would give her the recipe for mousse, which we had also provided as this year’s reward.

The next day, my retainers who were going to be performing the ritual gathered before third bell even rang. I opened the door to the workshop in my High Bishop’s chambers, handed out feystone brooches so that everyone could come inside, then began preparing the magic circles and such for being moved.

“Lady Rozemyne, shall we take these to the chapel?” Fran asked.

“Please. I’ve also told Hartmut to go there after delegating the paperwork. Ideally, our ritual will be largely identical to the one performed at the Royal Academy.”

Because moving everything to the chapel involved manual labor, we called Gil and Fritz from the workshop to help Fran. They soon met up with Hartmut’s attendants, and the luggage was gone in the blink of an eye.

“Monika, has the orphanage been informed of our business?” I asked.

“Yes, milady. They have been told not to enter the chapel today.”

I needed to focus on making sure nobody entered the workshop, so the rest of the preparations were being left to Hartmut and Damuel. Muriella, Roderick, and Philine were acting as their scholar assistants.

Once the luggage was all en route, I retrieved the feystone brooches from everyone, closed the door to the workshop, and then headed to the chapel. Hartmut and the others were already there, carrying out the preparations as instructed.

The shrine was adorned with cloth and fruit, the incense burners were lit, and a faint, sweet scent drifted through the air. A red carpet stretched toward the altar, and the cloth with the magic circle on it was spread out. The circle at the Royal Academy had been embroidered, but this one was simply drawn with ink; it seemed that not even Ferdinand had wanted to go through that much effort.

“To test whether this magic circle functions and protections from each element can be obtained one at a time, I would like Angelica to try using it first,” I said. Because the circle was only drawn on, it was possible that parts had faded or rubbed away over the years—or maybe it needed to be in a certain position to be used at all. “I shall observe her ritual, but everyone else will perform alone, as is standard in the Royal Academy. Perhaps the ritual is meant to be more private, or maybe complete focus is required.”

Someone needed to watch Angelica to ensure that she actually chanted the prayer, but everyone else could perform alone. We all shot her looks of concern. She had steely determination in her eyes and was exuding confidence, but that didn’t mean a thing. At times like this, nobody had any faith in her.

“I will have Hartmut perform after Angelica,” I said.

“Not me?” Cornelius asked, curious. This first performance was only a test, so it was fine for Angelica to do the honors, but tradition would dictate that we then go in order of status.

“Yes, as Hartmut needs to return to his High Priest work,” I said. There were plenty of people who could stand in for Cornelius and guard me, but Hartmut was the only one who could give out orders as the High Priest. Plus, even though we were performing these rituals now, that was only to appease Wilfried and Hartmut. Things in the temple were very busy at the moment,

what with the baptism ceremonies and Spring Prayer right around the corner.

“I see,” Cornelius replied. “It certainly is more efficient to have Hartmut go first—but, for future reference, disturbing the proper order of things is seldom received well in noble society.” He was accepting my methods while at the same time taking care to remind me that most others would find it extremely offensive.

“I will return to my workshop after observing Angelica’s ritual,” I said. “Hartmut will perform next, then Cornelius, Matthias, Laurenz, Muriella, Gretia, and Damuel. Report to me once everyone is finished; Muriella will need to repeat hers after Mother arrives.”

“Understood.”

After confirming that everyone followed, I pointed to a crate by my feet. “In this box are some mana rejuvenation potions. Do not forget that the circle must be completely and utterly filled with your mana.”

That was the last of my advice, so everyone stepped outside the chapel, leaving Angelica and me alone. The guard knights would be keeping watch while the rituals were performed.

I took a rejuvenation potion from the crate and held it out to Angelica. “Now... let us begin. You will speak the names of the specified gods so that we can confirm whether the ritual works. If all goes well, you will receive the divine protections you desire.”

“Right.”

Angelica accepted the rejuvenation potion from me, then stood atop the magic circle. She knelt in the direction of the altar, touched the circle, and started channeling her mana into it.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world,” Angelica began. She then chanted the names of the seven primary gods, speaking slowly and carefully so as not to make any mistakes.

The symbols for Fire and Wind, her affinities, began to shine—then, two rather short pillars of light shot up from the magic circle. Seeing someone else perform the ritual made me realize just how weird my own had ended up being.

Every element had started to shine from the start, and the pillars that had followed had been twice as large as Angelica's. Comparing with others truly was important.

My ritual must have been pretty unique. The pillars of light just kept growing when I obtained the divine protections of the subordinate gods.

Next, Angelica started praying the names of the subordinates. "Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale. Angriff the God of War. Let me be granted the protection of those divinities who grace my prayers with their approval."

Is she seriously only praying to the two gods she cares about?!

Angelica must have wanted nothing more than the divine protections of those two gods because she ended the prayer immediately after speaking their names. The pillars of light didn't grow in response—on the contrary, they were sucked back into the magic circle and vanished entirely.

"I think that was a failure," I observed.

"So I *do* need to memorize the names of all the gods..." Angelica muttered, her expression clouded. "That isn't good."

Today, I'd discovered that filling the magic circle with mana didn't mean a thing if you disregarded the traditional method of the ritual or tried to shorten it. That was probably why, even now, third-years at the Royal Academy had a shared class devoted to memorizing the names of all the gods. The time-honored process likely would have faded into obscurity had it not been made absolutely necessary.

"Let's try again," I said. "See if the ritual will work if you repeat after Stenluke."

Life returned to Angelica's eyes. "As you will," she replied. "I entrust everything to Stenluke."

"Master, I will comply because this is an experiment, but you must learn to do this yourself," Stenluke chided in his very familiar voice as Angelica chugged the potion I'd given her. His reason for cooperating made me wonder whether he was somehow taking after the personality he was based on.

I'll make sure to send Ferdinand the results of my research.

"Here we go," Angelica said. She got back into position atop the circle, her mana now recovered, and started again. "I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world."

It seemed that, at this point, even Angelica could remember the names of the seven primary gods without issue. The problem was the subordinates.

"O subordinates of Darkness, Chaosfliehe the God of Warding, Verbergen the God of Concealment..." Angelica repeated after Stenluke. They were gods whom she had never prayed to, so the magic circle didn't react at all.

Incidentally, both of those subordinate gods had given me their divine protections. The fact that I was supposed to have Chaosfliehe looking out for me made me wonder why I was still getting bounced from one tragedy to another.

"O subordinate of Fire, Angriff the God of War..."

That was the first name to get a reaction; the blue pillar representing the God of Fire rose up a little. Erwachlehren the God of Guidance also reacted, and the pillar grew taller. Seeing this brought a smile to Angelica's face. She must have been feeling motivated because her voice became more upbeat as she continued to repeat after Stenluke.

"O subordinates of Wind, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time, Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale..."

This time, the yellow pillar rose. It seemed that Angelica had received Steifebrise's protection. I had thought she would also receive the protection of Ordoschnelli the Goddess of Couriers, given her association with speed, but that ultimately wasn't the case.

No other names produced a reaction from the magic circle, and Angelica reached the end of the ritual without incident.

"Let me be granted the protection of those divinities who grace my prayers with their approval."

The blue and yellow pillars stretched up into the air, spun around, then

scattered the light of their blessings over Angelica. The mana that had been filling the magic circle then streamed along the carpet to the shrine, where it was absorbed into the statues of the gods.

“That was a success,” I said.

If my own ritual was any indication, then Angelica had absolutely obtained some divine protections. I couldn’t tell whether she had received the protection of the Goddess of Wind, however.

“Did you obtain Schutzaria’s divine protection, by chance?” I asked.

“I did. The yellow pillar vanished when I attempted this at the Royal Academy, so I think it worked this time.”

So the pillars just disappear if you don’t get the divine protections of their primary gods, huh? The more you know.

Angelica had experienced something rare during her first attempt at the ritual. Rare, but not particularly desirable—nobody would want to see their hard-earned pillar of light vanish without giving any divine protections.

“Your success today was because of Stenluke,” I said. “Be sure to grant him mana, praise him, or some such.”

“Right. It was because of you as well, Lady Rozemyne, since you granted me Stenluke in the first place. I can’t wait to go to the training grounds to see whether I’ve gotten any stronger. I also want to try beating Master, even just once.”

Angelica was practically buzzing with excitement, but while her new divine protections would have an immediately noticeable effect on her mana efficiency, that itself didn’t make her any stronger.

Unless the protection of Angriff actually does work like that...

The knights reporting on Angriff’s divine blessing hadn’t mentioned anything of the sort, so I wasn’t convinced that she would receive a sudden buff or anything. Still, needing to expend less mana when using Stenluke was a huge deal to Angelica.

“There are plenty of guard knights here at the temple, so you may go to the

training grounds,” I said. “Be sure to tell Grandfather that you’ve obtained divine protections. Perhaps that will encourage him to come to the temple as well.”

Bonifatius seemed pretty openly against the temple, but maybe hearing about Angelica’s progress would change that.

I exited the chapel to find my retainers waiting outside, watching over the door in their assigned order. “Angelica succeeded, and the ritual seems to be working as intended,” I announced. “Hartmut, in you go. Come to my chambers after to report your results.”

“Understood,” Hartmut replied. “If you’ll excuse me...” He waved to Cornelius and then entered the chapel.

“Cornelius, you can wait here, since you’re next in line. Angelica, you may head to the training grounds. Everyone else, return to your duties for now.”

Roderick, Philine, Muriella, and Damuel went to help in the High Priest’s chambers, while Matthias and Laurenz guarded me. Gretia was waiting in the High Bishop’s chambers.

As for Angelica... she had already vanished.

Once we were back in the High Bishop’s chambers, I went straight to my workshop. I gave Gretia a feystone brooch so that she could enter as well, then told her to guide my retainers through to me as they returned from their rituals. Gretia would need to be present during any reports from my male retainers so that I wasn’t alone in the workshop with a boy.

“I’ll prepare sound-blocking magic tools so that you won’t hear what divine protections everyone obtained,” I said to Gretia. “Oh, and Fran—return to your normal duties. Gretia will handle our visitors.” He would normally be working in the High Priest’s chambers, but he had waited to welcome me back from the ritual.

Fran declined with a smile. “It would not be acceptable for you to be alone in the High Bishop’s chambers without a single temple attendant.”

“Lady Rozemyne, what are you making in the workshop?” Gretia asked.

“Charms.”

She gave me a curious look. “Were you not also making charms in the library’s workshop?”

“The ones I made yesterday were for the Gutenbergs. I need some for nobles as well.”

Ferdinand had given me ingredients when clearing out his temple workshop, but he had prioritized putting the ones with high mana capacities and multiple elements in my chambers. That meant I could make charms better suited for nobles here than I would have been able to in my library.

“Please bring Hartmut to me when he returns,” I said.

“As you wish.”

Inside the workshop, I chose the least mana-expensive of all the charms I was wearing and started to replicate it. I would need two kinds: one that reflected mana attacks and one that reflected physical attacks.

If we can offer some protection against an ambush, I’m sure the guard knights can deal with the rest.

Bonifatius had trained the absolute heck out of the archducal family’s guard knights. As I understood it, the only thing they wouldn’t be able to deal with was an attack they couldn’t see coming.

After finishing the charms for Wilfried and Charlotte, I exhaled. My two siblings both had plenty of mana thanks to the compression method, but Melchior wasn’t going to compare to them anytime soon. Simply controlling his mana was too much for him at the moment, so I would need to make him an even less demanding charm. After all, I’d always told Ferdinand not to use me as a benchmark when dealing with kids.

I remember everything perfectly. Wow, am I amazing or what?

“Lady Rozemyne, are these the charms you intend to give Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte for Spring Prayer?” came a voice.

“Oh, Hartmut.” I put down the ingredients for Melchior’s charm, stepped down from my stand, then went over to my desk. “You’ve finished your ritual, I

take it?”

Hartmut looked at my newly made charms and smiled. “You know, I will *also* be participating in Spring Prayer...” I didn’t really mind the thought of giving them to him, but this was my chance to make a request of my own.

“Consider them yours,” I replied with a grin, “but only if you stop that weird prayer of yours. Teaching that thing to kids must be blasphemous.”

To my surprise, Hartmut refused. He said that the children of the former Veronica faction needed to know who had saved their lives and that, if they remained ignorant of this fact and continued to complain about me, no amount of hard work would be enough for them to return to noble society. In his words, the prayer was an act of kindness to save them from that fate.

“Still, there must be other ways you could teach them that,” I retorted. Doing it through prayer just didn’t seem right.

Hartmut cast his eyes down in thought, then looked up again with a suspiciously dashing smile. “Understood, Lady Rozemyne. Your wish is my command. I do not know how the children will behave toward their ‘enemies’ in the archducal family, nor can I say how nobles will respond to their aggression, but... As long as I receive your charm as a gift, their futures mean nothing to me. I shall stop at once.”

W-Wait, what? Would getting rid of that prayer really cause such chaos? Is keeping it actually important for the children’s futures? Hold on a second.

My head was starting to spin. Maybe he was right. Continuing the prayer *was* the right move!

Before my thoughts could veer any further out of control, Gretia put a hand on my shoulder. “Lady Rozemyne. Stay strong. Teaching the children to feel grateful to the archducal family is admirable enough, but teaching them a modified prayer will only do them harm.”

“R-Right...” I muttered. “Thank you, Gretia. You have cleared away the fog that was clouding my mind. Hartmut, you are to stop reciting that prayer at once. Is that understood?”

Hartmut gave a regretful shrug and agreed.

“Moving on.” I gave Hartmut a sound-blocking magic tool, then prepared a pen and some paper. “Did you receive any divine protections from the subordinate gods?”

“Yes, my lady. From my elements, I obtained the divine protections of the Light subordinate Gebordnung the Goddess of Order, the Fire subordinate Anwachs the God of Growth, and the Wind subordinate Ordoschnelli the Goddess of Couriers.”

“Since you clarified that those are from *your* elements, can I assume that you obtained protections from other elements too?” I asked, taking notes.

Hartmut nodded, beaming. “I obtained the Life element through the divine protections of Dauerleben the God of Longevity and Schlaftraum the God of Dreams.”

“I’m told that having the Life element is rather rare, so that’s interesting.” Perhaps because he had participated in the Harvest Festival and the Dedication Ritual, Hartmut had obtained divine protections from subordinates I would never have expected.

“I obtained this many new divine protections after not even a year of performing religious ceremonies,” he said. “It seems that I would do well to participate in them even more fervently. A few more years of praying here and I may surpass Lord Wilfried.”

There weren’t many ceremonies in the temple that involved offering up one’s mana, which explained why Wilfried, who had spent years supplying mana to the foundational magics, had ended up obtaining more divine protections than Hartmut. Of course, Hartmut wasn’t all too pleased about this fact.

“Wilfried gives his mana on a daily basis, so you won’t have an easy time catching up to him,” I said. “I look forward to seeing which divine protections Charlotte obtains next year.”

I’d gathered all of the information I needed from Hartmut, so I told him to leave the workshop. Before I could resume work on Melchior’s charm, however, Cornelius was brought in by Gretia. I used the sound-blockers to ask him the same questions.

“Just like Leonore, I obtained divine protections from Angriff the God of War and Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale,” Cornelius informed me. “I’m relieved to have maintained my honor as your guard knight.”

Cornelius had started to feel a little anxious after his fiancée, Leonore, received Angriff’s divine protection before he did. Men had their pride, I supposed.

He must want to look cool in front of Leonore.

I smiled at Cornelius, feeling heartened. He must have noticed the meaning behind my look because he averted his gaze and said, “I also obtained the divine protection of the Darkness subordinate Verdraeos.”

“So you have the Darkness element now, then. Congratulations.”

Verdraeos was the God of Deliverance—entrusted with dispelling the Goddess of Chaos, if my memory served me right. He was certainly a suitable god for a knight to receive divine protection from.

“It was a pleasant surprise,” Cornelius said. “I didn’t expect to get any new elements.”

“Mother is going to be here this afternoon; perhaps you could report this to her as well. Or shall we instead send an ordonnanz to Leonore?” I asked, eyeing him while chuckling to myself.

Cornelius waved me away and refused. Then, after pinching my cheek, he left the workshop.

“I wonder... why does everyone pinch my cheeks?” I mused aloud, rubbing my face. It really smarted, but I tried my best to resume brewing Melchior’s charm.

I guess the name-sworn group is next. I’m eager to see how things went for them.

“After I chanted the names of the two supreme gods and the Eternal Five, the symbols of every single element began to shine,” Matthias reported while gripping a sound-blocker. The magic circle had reacted before he had even spoken the names of the subordinate gods, which reminded me of what

Roderick had said happened during his own ritual.

Matthias continued, “Fire, Wind, and Earth were my only affinities to begin with, so I didn’t expect all of the elements to shine from the start.”

Most mednobles only had two elements, but Matthias had three. I still remembered what a surprise it had been to see that his name-swearing stone was tricolor. Matthias’s grandmother was an archattendant who had moved with Gabriele from Ahrensbach to Ehrenfest, and she had greatly influenced the mana of the rest of their family. Giebe Gerlach had been none too pleased about the Leisegangs lording themselves over his kin, who possessed archnoble-level power.

“I personally wouldn’t have minded waiting for my graduation to perform the ritual,” Matthias said, “but I assume you are having all of your name-sworn repeat it now to see whether our being sworn to you has made us omni-elemental.”

I nodded. “That was the case for Roderick, but I wanted more evidence. We should know for certain after Muriella swears herself to another and repeats the ritual.”

“Doing that will prove fairly demanding...” Matthias murmured.

Yes, the process would place a tremendous burden on Muriella, but she was the only one who had received permission to swear her name again. The answer to our question—whether one’s elements were dependent on the person to whom one was sworn—would surely have a massive impact on the children currently in the orphanage and the playroom.

“Roderick felt a small boost after his name-swearing—enough that he was able to brew with a little more success,” I said. “Did you notice anything after yours?”

“In retrospect, I suppose I *did* start to feel the slightest bit more capable at brewing with elements I didn’t have an affinity for...”

Based on that response, the impact of elements gained through name-swearing was largely insignificant. Those who were closer to being laynobles than standard mednobles—like Roderick—noticed the change well enough, but

for someone like Matthias who was closer to being an archnoble, the improvement was almost negligible.

“Incidentally... which subordinates did you gain divine protections from?” I asked. Roderick had gained all of the elements after swearing his name to me, but he hadn’t obtained any new subordinates. Would the same hold true for Matthias?

He smiled a little. “I obtained divine protections from Angriff the God of War and Verdraeos the God of Deliverance.”

As we continued our conversation, I noticed Fran waiting at the door with Gretia, who informed me that it was fourth bell. “Fran says it is time for lunch,” she explained. “Please come out of the workshop when you are done.”

I concluded things with Matthias and exited the workshop as instructed. Among those waiting for me were Laurenz and Muriella; they had evidently returned from the chapel.

“I had just finished my ritual and was drinking a rejuvenation potion when fourth bell chimed,” Laurenz reported. “Muriella decided that she would wait until this afternoon to perform hers.”

“Very well,” I said. “I will wait until then to hear your results. Muriella will start the ritual, then Gretia will perform hers, so I will entrust Philine with guiding visitors to my workshop instead.”

Fran and Monika were preparing lunch when an ordonnanz flew into the room. The white bird landed in front of me and then said, “This is Leonore. Lord Bonifatius will accompany Lady Elvira to the temple.”

Grandfather?!

It continued, “My apologies. He decided that today would be a good time to visit.”

Any noble would speak to the benefits of obtaining new divine protections, so I could see why he had decided to come. Perhaps I was to blame for having told Angelica to brag to him, but I hadn’t expected him to react so suddenly. There would be plenty of tea and sweets, since we were already expecting Elvira, but I wasn’t ready emotionally.

I need to do my best to show him all the temple's good points.

Bonifatius was far from being an advocate of the temple, so I needed to make the most of this chance to win him over. He was a member of the archducal family to boot, so changing his opinion would surely influence the rest of his generation as well.

Hmm... This is a lot of pressure.

After briskly finishing lunch, I returned to the workshop with Philine and Laurenz and got straight to questioning the latter. "Quickly tell me which divine protections you obtained," I said. "I'm afraid we won't have time to speak like this once my mother and grandfather arrive."

Laurenz gripped the magic tool and gave me a teasing smile. "Do you mean to say that you would rather spend more time with me, Lady Rozemyne?"

I sighed, and my eyes flitted to Philine. "I merely thought it would be best to have this conversation while Gretia is away."

Laurenz said nothing in response; he merely raised an eyebrow at me to indicate his confusion.

"Gretia gets uncomfortable when boys tease her," I explained. "So don't go taking that same tone with her, Laurenz."

In fact, Gretia was uncomfortable around boys in general; she wanted to stay as far away from my male retainers as possible, according to a report from Lieseleta. She would also grimace whenever Laurenz tried to joke with her as he did with me.

Laurenz faltered, then sighed and adopted a more serious expression. "I'll take more care with her."

As it turned out, Laurenz had ended up with identical results to Matthias: swearing his name to me had made him omni-elemental, and he had obtained the divine protections of Angriff and Verdraeos. If considered alongside Cornelius as well, that made him the third person to have received Verdraeos's protection.

Leonore didn't get that one, but maybe it's the easiest of the Darkness subordinates for a knight to receive. Wait, no... I got it as well. I don't see the connection.

Laurenz interrupted my thoughts with a mutter. "If more people learn that you can get more divine protections by praying in the temple, my little brother and the others might not have such a hard time after they're baptized as the aub's charges..."

"Yes, though such great change will not come anytime soon," I noted. "Hm... Please do tell Bertram how much praying has benefited you. Since you are his brother by blood, he should be more inclined to believe you."

I saw Laurenz off to the orphanage, then Philine entered again. She had with her a very nervous-looking Muriella, who accepted the sound-blocker with trembling hands and then stammered, "L-Lady Rozemyne, I, erm..."

"You became omni-elemental, I assume. It's a result of the name-swearing."

"Oh, I see... On top of that... I obtained the divine protection of Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts. I'm glad, since I spent so much time praying to her with Lady Lueuradi..."

Students from various duchies had started praying after participating in our Dedication Ritual, but Lueuradi was the only third-year among them who had obtained a new divine protection from a subordinate god. She and Muriella seemed to be fairly close friends. They both wanted the protections of gods who often appeared in love stories, so they both wore charms around their necks at all times. Muriella had shown me hers.

"Please continue to work hard for more divine protections," I said.

"Furthermore, once Mother arrives, you will need to give your name to her and repeat the protections ritual. I imagine it will be beyond strenuous, but I trust that you have the strength to endure it."

"Yes, my lady..." Muriella replied, looking a bit tense.

Gretia had yet to return from the chapel when Elvira arrived with Bonifatius and Leonore. Bonifatius had his retainers with him, so they made for a much larger crowd than I'd expected. I couldn't help but feel a little hesitant as I

welcomed my mother and grandfather both.

Fran poured us all some tea while Nicola brought in the sweets we had prepared. Bonifatius watched them with a hard expression.

Perhaps trying to ease the atmosphere, Elvira let out a chuckle. “I was ever so surprised when Leonore told me you wanted to come along, Lord Bonifatius.”

“It seemed a good opportunity to see the temple while at the same time acting as your guard,” he replied. “This is no place for a woman to be alone.”

“Oh, but I am quite fine on my own. Rozemyne and Cornelius come here often, and it was Karstedt who furnished the rooms.” She had received a very thorough description of the temple after Karstedt and Eckhart scouted the place out, so she no longer held any reservations about visiting.

“The temple is well cleaned, and—thanks to my superb attendants—you are both perfectly comfortable,” I said. “Would you not agree?”

Bonifatius drank the tea that Fran had poured for him, ate one of the cookies that Nicola had brought over, then gave a curt nod. He seemed to understand that life here wasn’t all that different from life in the castle.

“Moving forward, the temple will be hosting more children, including Melchior and those from the playroom,” I said. “They can study for their written lessons here, but I am afraid they will lack for physical training. I would like you to remedy that, if you are willing.”

“You want me to train... the children of the former Veronica faction...?” Bonifatius murmured.

“Indeed. Most of them will be sworn to the archducal family. They have quite literally entrusted us with their lives so that they can serve as our retainers. How could we not train them in return?”

Those who were living in the temple were a lot more likely to end up serving Melchior or me. I’d struggled to secure retainers while I was asleep in the jureve because none of the children had really known me, and it had been up to them to decide whom they served. Meeting with them often was therefore very important.

“Moreover,” I continued, “your grandson Nikolaus has entered the temple as an apprentice blue priest. Please grant his wish to become a knight.”

“I... shall consider it.”

“I thank you ever so much.”

Even if he only came by every now and again, Bonifatius’s presence would instill hope in the kids who wanted to be knights. Not to mention, Melchior’s and my guards could take turns watching their training.

“Incidentally, Grandfather... have Angelica’s divine protections made her any stronger?”

“It wasn’t by much, but she’s become faster. Stenluke also seems longer than before. Although most people wouldn’t even notice these things, for someone as skilled as Angelica, those slight improvements meant everything. I still won, of course, but it was reasonably hard-fought.”

Angelica had moved faster and attacked more ferociously than Bonifatius was used to. He maintained that he hadn’t even come close to being defeated, but her improvements had been enough to make him curious about the rituals we were performing and the steadily increasing strength of my retainers.

“Mother, Grandfather—since you’ve come all this way, would you like to perform the ritual for obtaining divine protections? Grandfather, with all the time you’ve spent offering mana to the foundational magics, I am sure you will receive protections aplenty.”

“No, I don’t think I will...” Bonifatius replied, his expression dark and menacing all of a sudden. I was shocked to realize just how much he hated rituals.

Elvira giggled and stepped in to explain things. “Rozemyne, as much as I would love to participate, not even I, a writer, can recall the names of all the gods. It was decades ago that I learned them and the prayers in class. Lord Bonifatius and I would both need a lot more time and practice before we could perform the ritual. Isn’t that right, Lord Bonifatius?”

“Right. I *am* interested, since Rozemyne says that performing Mana Replenishment is enough to secure more divine protections, but... I’ll give it a

try once I'm better prepared."

Elvira hadn't forgotten the names she needed to know for her love stories, but she couldn't remember all of the minor gods. To her, even the words and order of the prayer were hazy at best.

Well, that's fair.

After all, even Damuel had said that he would need to relearn the prayer for the ritual. For nobles who had memorized the names of the gods decades ago and then had no use for most of them since, it seemed entirely reasonable that some review would be needed.

"Rozemyne, we have here a letter from the aub," Elvira said. "He has granted me permission to assist with this ritual and said that he will entrust this business with Muriella to us." She handed the letter in question to Philine, who then passed it to me.

At once, I started to read this new correspondence from Sylvester. It could be summarized quite simply: "I'll turn a blind eye to any *less than traditional* dealings with Muriella, but only if you immediately share your results and allow me to perform the ritual too."

It makes sense to have him redo the ritual sooner rather than later. He'll benefit greatly from being able to use his mana more efficiently.

Making sure the archducal family had more mana at its disposal was one of our top priorities at the moment. In an ideal world, Bonifatius would join Sylvester and secure new divine protections alongside him.

"Grandfather, will you be here when Sylvester comes for the ritual?" I asked. "It would be very convenient if you could attend, but you would need to learn the prayer and the names of the gods in quite a hurry..."

"Hm... I would think so," he replied, then looked at the letter with a deep frown. "That said, I didn't think Sylvester would be willing to come to the temple. I suppose I'm just not as young and sprightly anymore..."

I wanted to shout, "That isn't the problem!" at the top of my lungs, but I just barely managed to hold my tongue.

I mean, Sylvester came to the temple wearing blue robes and tagged along for Spring Prayer forever ago. He was even pumped up about hunting in the lower city's forest. I don't think age has anything to do with it.

You couldn't pay me to reveal that my first meeting with Sylvester had been in the temple, but it was news that would shock anyone else speechless. An archduke putting on a disguise to participate in Spring Prayer was just unthinkable. Only now that I was accustomed to noble culture could I appreciate the pure craziness of Sylvester's past actions.

"Now then, Mother—let me give Muriella to you so that we can report back to the aub. Grandfather, could you wait here?"

Name-swearing wasn't something to be mentioned in public, so I'd made sure to speak indirectly. We would perform it privately in the workshop.

"I want to see this ritual for obtaining divine protections again," Bonifatius said, a stern look on his face. "Would it be problematic for me to watch one?" He was still somewhat on guard against the temple and its rituals, but he seemed interested.

"Damuel is about to begin his, so you could ask for his permission to attend."

I was well aware that Damuel would *never* refuse Bonifatius—not in a million years. He was a noble sacrifice, thrust in the firing line to spare Gretia from having a man intrude on her ritual. If we sent word ahead of time, he'd at least be able to prepare emotionally.

"The ritual is not to be performed in public, and you are surely too considerate to enter the chapel alone with two women," I continued. In the temple, it was seldom appropriate to leave men and women alone together. "Damuel is my only male retainer who has not yet performed the ritual, so please ask him."

Bonifatius nodded.

"Cornelius," I said, "guide our grandfather to the chapel, if you would. Do not let anybody else attend the ritual, though; Damuel would not be able to concentrate with too many eyes on him."

"Got it," Bonifatius replied in his stead. "I'll get my retainers to wait outside

the chapel. Come on, Cornelius.”

And with that, Bonifatius practically dragged Cornelius out of the room. I watched them go, then took Elvira and Muriella into my workshop. Leonore accompanied us as both an observer and a guard.

I unlocked a box sitting atop one of the shelves, then peered at the name stones neatly arranged inside. After a moment, I picked out the one belonging to Muriella and said, “Muriella, I return your name to you.”

From there, I pretty much performed the name-swearing ceremony in reverse. I sucked the name stone’s mana back into me and watched as the white cocoon surrounding it slowly disappeared, revealing an equally white box. As expected, Muriella’s name was inside.

“I am honored,” Muriella said. She looked closely at her returned name, then inhaled slowly and knelt before Elvira. “Lady Elvira, I ask that you accept my name. I spend my days immersed in your stories, and through them I feel the visits of Bluanfah. From the very bottom of my heart, I desire nothing more than to weave beautiful stories with you—to spread them through the world and reach as many people as we can.”

“O Muriella, my kindred soul. I accept your name,” Elvira answered, extending a hand to the white box. She then poured her mana into it all at once, as I’d instructed.

Muriella had expected another wave of pain... but it never came. She looked up at Elvira in shock, not having suffered at all.

“Thus concludes the name-swearing,” Elvira said. “Muriella, would you please repeat the protections ritual?”

“Yes, my lady.”

We left the workshop to find that Gretia had returned from performing her ritual. She had apparently been very taken aback when, upon coming out of the chapel, she had found herself standing face-to-face with Bonifatius and his retainers.

“Damuel was very troubled when he heard that you granted Lord Bonifatius permission to watch his ritual,” she said.

“I thought it better that his ritual be intruded upon than yours, Gretia. Damuel is an honorable sacrifice whom we shall not soon forget.”

Gretia placed a hand on her ample chest and sighed in relief, having no doubt just pictured Bonifatius bursting into the chapel during her ritual. “I must find a way to express my thanks to him later...”

“You could offer to be his bride,” I suggested with a cackle. “He’d genuinely cry tears of joy.”

Gretia shook her head with a solemn expression. “I am too uncomfortable around men to ever want a husband. I will refuse to marry unless you order it.”

Too bad, Damuel. She didn’t consider you for a second.

“Thanks to Muriella’s assistance, we have determined that one’s elements are tied to the person one is sworn to,” I announced. “On top of that, everyone obtained additional protections. Many even obtained new elements. Our experiments here have produced outstanding results.”

Hartmut had obtained the Life element and divine protections from various subordinates. Cornelius had obtained the Darkness element and protections from primarily fighting-related gods. Matthias and Laurenz had essentially become omni-elemental after swearing their names to me. Gretia had as well, and she had obtained the protection of Verbergen the God of Concealment.

As for Muriella, she had ceased being omni-elemental once she was no longer sworn to me. Her elements were now being influenced by Elvira’s instead, though she still had the divine protection of Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts.

I gave Roderick a report consolidating all of these findings—with the names redacted, of course—and told him to deliver it to Sylvester in the castle.

“Hm... The ceremony was interesting enough,” Bonifatius remarked. “I’ll work on remembering the prayer and the names of the gods.”

“As will I,” Elvira agreed. “It would be wonderful to have the divine protections of Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts and Grammaratur the Goddess of Language.”

Both appeared to be satisfied—Bonifatius because he had seen Damuel's ritual, and Elvira because she had obtained a new, loyal vassal and found out about Cornelius obtaining the Darkness element. It was great to see such optimism from two members of an older generation that reviled the temple. Perhaps their enthusiasm would help shift the general opinion among nobles.

“Even after seeing it with my own eyes, I'm struggling to believe that someone can receive new elements,” Bonifatius said, then shot a glance at Damuel, who was slumped over in disappointment. He knew which protections Damuel had obtained because he had been there for the ritual, whereas I knew because I'd put together the report for Sylvester.

There isn't much I can say except that they were very appropriate for him.

Damuel had obtained the divine protection of Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding and the Light element with it. From the Wind element, which he had already possessed, he had obtained the protections of Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time and Jugereise the Goddess of Separation. He had prayed desperately to Liebeskhilfe in the past, hoping that he would get to marry Brigitte, but he hadn't prayed to Jugereise at all. The fact that she had given him her protection anyway no doubt meant she had taken a liking to him.

“I'm never getting married...” Damuel murmured, his grievance made all the more serious by the vacant look in his eyes.

Clarissa's Invasion

"Eheheheh. Everything's perfect," I said.

It was the day of our meeting with the lower city's merchants, so I'd gathered together the many charms I'd made—including some spares—and prepared a list of topics to be discussed. Also with me were some recipes; the Othmar Company had suggested an exchange of recipes between Leise and Hugo. Leise's were going to make up this summer's menu for the Italian restaurant, so I was going to use this opportunity to judge them as an investor.

New recipes! Yippee!

Come third bell, I would be going to the meeting with Roderick, Philine, Melchior, his retainers, Brunhilde, and a combination of young scholars, as well as adult scholars from Groschel. The merchants were due to come before us, so as not to keep any of us nobles waiting. Zahm would announce their arrival and guide us to the meeting room when the time came.

"Lady Rozemyne," Fran said, "the High Priest is requesting permission to enter."

I granted it, then he opened the door. Hartmut entered at once, his usual self-assured smile replaced with a rarely seen look of concern.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"My intention was to wait until *after* your meeting to report this, as I understand its importance to you, but I cannot shake the feeling that things are even worse than I thought. I am afraid that... Clarissa has left Dunkelfelger."

"Excuse me?"

Clarissa had chosen Hartmut as her fiancé so that she could become my retainer, only for him to enter the temple and take over from Ferdinand as the High Priest. Priests and shrine maidens were forbidden from getting married, meaning Hartmut would need to wait until I came of age and we both left the temple.

Upon hearing all this, Clarissa had become furious. “I don’t mind postponing our wedding, but you *must* allow me to move to Ehrenfest as your bride-to-be. I won’t let you delay my becoming Lady Rozemyne’s retainer.”

As with all women, Clarissa would be expected to resign from her workplace to have and raise a child at some point after her marriage. If she could get into Ehrenfest using her position as Hartmut’s fiancée, however, then she would be able to serve me nonstop for as long as their wedding was delayed. She had been quite forceful about how she wanted to move here as soon as possible.

Under normal circumstances, their engagement would have been canceled in a heartbeat—but these were no normal circumstances. Aub Dunkelfelger had agreed with Clarissa’s bizarre claims that she had “won the engagement through battle, as is tradition,” and that only she could cancel it as a result.

Only in Dunkelfelger, folks...

Hartmut had told me that, after discussing things with her family and Aub Dunkelfelger at the Interduchy Tournament, they had come to an agreement that Clarissa could move to Ehrenfest during the Archduke Conference—with Sylvester’s permission, of course.

“And did he give his permission?” I asked.

“He did. Aub Ehrenfest seems to have said that he would welcome Clarissa with open arms, since you are in dire straits without Lord Ferdinand, and a retainer from a top-ranking duchy would be an enormous boon.”

There was nothing strange about that—it was true that I was struggling without Ferdinand and that the assistance of a top-ranking scholar like Clarissa would benefit me greatly.

“But why did she leave *now*?” I asked. “The Archduke Conference hasn’t happened yet, has it? Is she coming through the Royal Academy?”

Knights would take turns guarding the teleportation circles while the Royal Academy was out, but they were generally sealed off. To get Clarissa here, we would need to open the sealed doors and arrange for all of the relevant people to be in position—a significant change of plans.

“We didn’t receive any notice from Dunkelfelger, did we?” I asked.

“The aub and I only found out last night. It would seem that Aub Dunkelfelger deeply, *deeply* regrets his duchy’s involvement in what has happened to Lord Ferdinand. He muttered that if Clarissa’s early arrival would assist Ehrenfest in any capacity, that would be good too.”

Aub Dunkelfelger! Come onnn!

Clarissa’s trained ears had not missed this idle remark, and she had gleefully departed her home duchy with only a single female guard knight in tow for protection. Not wanting to trouble Ehrenfest any further, she had elected to take a land route rather than go through the Royal Academy. On top of everything else, she had left bright and early the day after the feast celebrating spring.

Clarissa’s parents had awoken one sleepy morning, expecting a comfortable day now that the coming-of-age celebrations and winter socializing were over, only to discover that their daughter had departed. They had immediately rushed to the aub to inform him. The archducal couple had paled upon hearing the news, thinking that Dunkelfelger would once again be troubling Ehrenfest, then contacted Sylvester using an archduke-exclusive line of communication to inform him of the situation and apologize.

“A very apologetic Aub Dunkelfelger asked Aub Ehrenfest to fetch Clarissa from Frenbelta’s border gate,” Hartmut continued. “Clarissa’s parents are chasing after her as fast as they can, while Mother hurried home last night to prepare a room and everything else needed to welcome her.”

On the one hand, Clarissa’s abrupt change of plans was troublesome indeed, but on the other, we really were lacking manpower. There was no point weighing up the pros and cons, though; she and her parents had already departed, so there was no helping it now. Plus, it was the duty of a bride or groom to welcome their partner at the border gate.

Clarissa was going on a rampage, but she was at least being considerate. She had chosen not to use our border gate with Ahrensbach, which was closest to her, and was instead going to meet us at the one nearest to the city of Ehrenfest—our border gate with Frenbelta. It would take her several days to travel through Old Werkestock and Frenbelta to arrive there, which meant we

had time to prepare.

“Hartmut, when will you be leaving and returning?” I asked. “I expect our plans for Spring Prayer will need to be adjusted.” The fact that the bridal brigade had left now meant that they would arrive at Frenbeltaag’s border gate around the time we were going to leave for Spring Prayer.

“I will need to discuss matters with my parents before I can say anything for sure,” Hartmut answered.

“I wonder if there’s a law in Dunkelfelger requiring all acts of kindness to be equally bothersome...” I mused aloud. “We will need to give Clarissa a sharp word or two about checking others’ plans before acting.”

Having to change plans was always a pain in the neck, and that only became more true the more people were involved. For something like Spring Prayer, which required a tremendous amount of manpower, any change to our schedule was a nightmare.

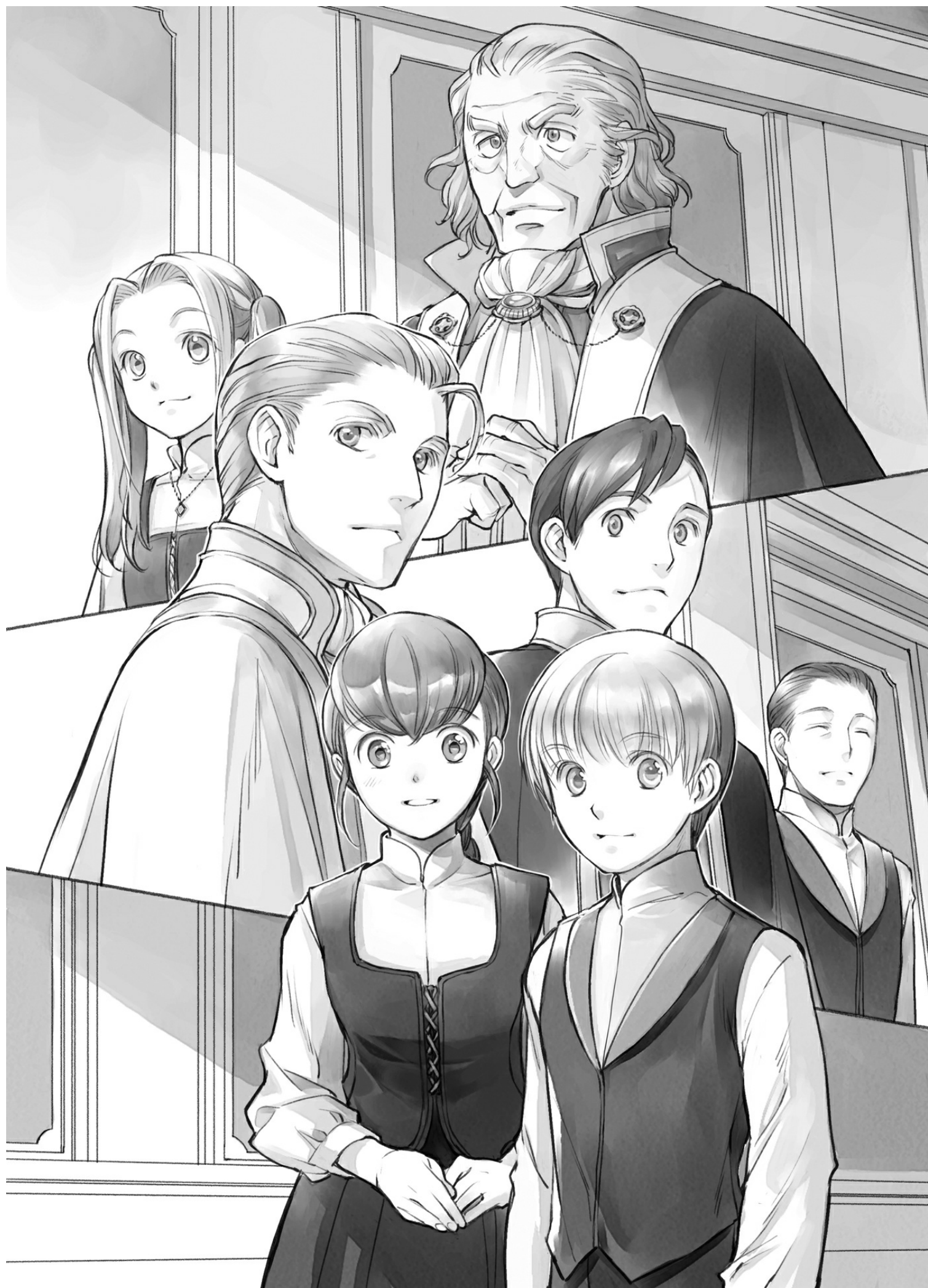
I sighed just as Zahm entered the room. The merchants had arrived.

“Clarissa won’t be arriving immediately,” Hartmut said. “I will send word once we have more detailed plans; for now, let us go to the meeting room. It would be best to distribute the commoner charms before the scholars arrive.”

I nodded, then went to the meeting room with Cornelius and Monika, the latter of whom was carrying the box of charms. Everyone from Zahm’s report had arrived: the guildmaster, Freida, and Cosimo from the Othmar Company; Otto, Tuuli, and Theo from the Gilberta Company; and Benno, Lutz, and Mark from the Plantin Company.

Seeing so many familiar faces in one place really does ease my heart.

The last time we had met like this was when we had revealed that Ferdinand would be moving to Ahrensbach. Tuuli and the others standing at the back looked so much more like adults than before—which made sense, given that their coming-of-age was just around the corner. I was growing too, but I could only hope they noticed.



“Lady Rozemyne,” the guildmaster said. He brought his right hand, balled into a fist, to his left palm, then introduced himself as the merchants’ representative. I recognized his gesture as the spring greeting for merchants and did the same.

“Blessed be the melting of the snow. May the Goddess of Spring’s boundless magnanimity grace you.”

During this exchange, Fran and Zahm poured tea and brought in sweets. I directed Monika to place the box of charms on the table, then told everyone about Ferdinand’s concerns.

“I expect you all know a lot more about interacting with the visiting merchants than I do, but still—out of concern for the worst-case scenario, I have prepared some protective charms that even commoners can use. It would be my pleasure to gift them to you all. You are the central pillars of our duchy’s merchant community, and I want nothing more than to keep you safe.”

“We will accept them with honor,” Benno replied, carefully mulling over my warning. “It certainly is true that the visiting merchants will be more familiar with Ehrenfest this time around, which will make incidents more likely. We shall hone our senses and exercise the utmost caution during the summer.”

Monika then distributed the charms. Most of the recipients were focused on their gifts, but Tuuli and Lutz alone shot me concerned glances that seemed to say, “Are these going to do anything? Are they safe?” To them, I was the same helpless Myne who couldn’t do anything for herself. It was kind of nostalgic but also a little vexing.

You’re both so mean... I’ve grown too, you know! At least a bit! And I came first-in-class again! Those charms you’re holding? They work perfectly! I made sure they had no problems at all!

I couldn’t actually say any of that, so I merely picked up one of the spare charms and started to explain how they were used. Of course, in the process, I made sure to stress that I’d thought everything through myself—I wasn’t just following some instructions from Ferdinand.

“The charms that I and other members of the archducal family use are

sensitive enough to activate from forcefully bumping shoulders with someone,” I said. “I realized that would affect your day-to-day activities, which is why I made sure these would only activate against forces that would otherwise cause great harm.”

Ferdinand would have made the charms to noble standards. I, on the other hand, had properly considered the demands of everyday life in the lower city—something that no other noble would be able to do. Tuuli gave me a bit of an impressed look, so I puffed out my chest.

Impressive, right? Eheheheh.

“We are grateful beyond words for your consideration.”

“I made more for the Gutenbergs,” I said, “and I will distribute those before we leave for Kirnberger. Also, hide them from sight before the other nobles arrive; many will think they are too much for commoners to have.”

The remaining charms were then put away, and I pivoted to a more innocuous topic of conversation.

“At the start of winter, the orphanage welcomed new children who are henceforth going to be visiting the workshop. While they are offering their assistance, would you be able to teach them how to speak with merchants? I want there to be scholars who can properly understand commoners by the time I leave my post as High Bishop.”

“Oh? That sounds like quite an important request,” Benno said, with a look of amusement that seemed to add, “You can count on me.” He doubtless understood that the new children in the orphanage had noble blood and would grow up to be nobles.

“We are going to be joined today by several scholars, whom I also hope to train into my replacements. Their objective is simply to observe the nature of these meetings, so they likely will not speak,” I explained, though I made sure to specify that Brunhilde and her scholars would chime in when the topic of Groschel came up. “Furthermore, I plan to spend the bulk of my time until next winter in the temple and would like the Gilberta Company to visit me. I will need outfits and hair ornaments.”

“Understood,” Otto said. “It makes sense that you will need new outfits, Lady Rozemyne; it is apparent that you have grown since we met last season.”

His validation brought a smile to my face. I asked that he visit the temple after the baptism ceremony but before Spring Prayer, and it was then that Zahm entered the room; it seemed the scholars from the castle had arrived.

Benno, Otto, and the guildmaster rose from their seats, then knelt with those who had been standing beside them to welcome the nobles. Once everyone was in position, I stood as well and granted the new nobles permission to enter. They trudged in, with Melchior taking the lead. I didn’t recognize several of the scholars.

“Allow me to begin with introductions,” I said. “This is Melchior, the son of Aub Ehrenfest. He will take my place as High Bishop after I come of age, so we have begun the handover process for both temple work and meetings such as this one.”

“Blessed be the waves of Flutrane the Goddess of Water who guided us toward this serendipitous meeting,” the merchants said collectively.

This was likely the first time Melchior had ever needed to give a blessing after being greeted by commoners; he looked slightly tense as he produced a green light from his ring.

I continued, “This is Brunhilde, daughter of Giebe Groschel. She is currently my retainer but will not remain in my service for long—she was recently engaged to the aub as his second wife.”

“I will be working with some of you for Groschel’s renovation and look forward to your cooperation,” Brunhilde said.

After that, I offered everyone seats. On the nobles’ side, only Brunhilde, Melchior, and I sat down; everyone else stood behind us as retainers and scholars. The merchants returned to their feet, then returned to their original positions: Benno, Otto, and the guildmaster were sitting while Tuuli and the others stood.

“First,” I said, “let us begin with the topic most important to you all: renovating Groschel.” I explained our plan to recreate the province in a cleaner

image, as we had done with the lower city to welcome new merchants, then listed the suggestions I had given Sylvester. “We plan to finish the work by next year and maintain our current business partners until then.”

“That is very welcome news,” the guildmaster said, looking a bit relieved. “The city is already filled to the brim.”

“Indeed. That is why I must ask you to recruit merchants for branch stores, while the Othmar Company establishes a second Italian restaurant. The first is rather popular with merchants of other duchies, no? We believe that Groschel will need one of its own. Naturally, I intend to invest as well.”

The guildmaster glanced at Freida. She sought permission to speak, then asked about the plan for training chefs and waiters.

“This won’t be until after Spring Prayer,” I replied, “but we expect more apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens to join the temple. How would you feel about having chefs commute to serve them and gain experience that way? I would appreciate the opportunity to supplement our kitchen staff, and my intention is to leave training them to Hugo.”

Freida cast her eyes down for a moment, no doubt performing a few calculations in her head. “There are more and more apprentice chefs among the Eatery Guild who wish to work at the Italian restaurant, owing to its popularity among those from other duchies,” she said. “Many would be willing to commute to the temple if doing so meant being taught by Hugo himself. I will seek them out.”

I was then asked a plethora of questions: how many chefs would be trained at once, what their wages and work hours would be, what their work environment was going to be like, and so on. I answered them one by one, recalling Hugo and Ella’s accommodations from when I was an apprentice blue shrine maiden.

“A branch store is a very appealing idea,” Benno remarked, “but it may be difficult to have it up and running by next summer. If the Groschel renovation is to be done in autumn, then the orders for new furnishings will not be ready in time.” He was speaking from his own painful experiences setting up a high-class eatery and the monastery.

Brunhilde took this opportunity to describe the furniture we had confiscated:

“There are some furnishings and cooking implements we can move from noble estates, under the aub’s authority. Using those would resolve the furniture problem, would it not?”

“We plan to build new inns in Groschel and use the same approach to furnish them,” I said. “We are also in the process of recruiting individuals to work in these inns and train new servers. Is that not right, Brunhilde?”

She nodded. “Lady Rozemyne came up with the idea herself. We will bring individuals recruited from around Groschel to Ehrenfest via carriages, which the giebe will arrange for. We hope for these recruits to have their new duties ingrained into them this spring and to be taught what to expect during the busy summer.”

“I cannot imagine this being an easy feat to accomplish, but in addition to training staff to work in everyone’s second stores, it will give us more personnel to staff the inns this year. An excellent idea, is it not?”

“There can be no doubting that it came from you, Lady Rozemyne,” Benno replied, his lips curving into a smirk. “I am in favor.”

As we cackled together, Brunhilde carefully interjected to address the merchants. “Attention, everyone. A moment of your time. I participated in a discussion with the aub, wherein we concluded that it would be best for you to design the schematics for the branch stores yourselves, before the end of summer. That will make ordering the furnishings much easier.”

At once, the guildmaster leaned forward. “Will that not inspire others to establish secondary stores of their own?”

Rarely were entwickelns used to remake an entire city. Merchants often had no choice but to make do with and sometimes modify buildings made long ago, but this opportunity to come up with their own designs would save them immense amounts of money on internal renovations.

On cue, one of the scholars standing behind Brunhilde produced a piece of paper. It was a list of stores they wanted to expand into Groschel.

“We would appreciate having the Merchant’s Guild assist us in motivating these businesses to set up new stores in Groschel,” Brunhilde said. “Without

these popular establishments that our visitors from other duchies have come to expect, Groschel will be a merchant city in name alone, with nothing but inns to garner interest. That will do nothing to reduce the burden on Ehrenfest's lower city."

She sure is working super hard on this, considering that she's a rich archnoble girl who had never been to the lower city before.

I was moved to see Brunhilde speaking directly to commoner merchants instead of communicating through her scholars. She had changed a shocking amount in just two years.

Brunhilde had spoken to Giebe Groschel and Sylvester in private, so most of her plans for Groschel were news to me as well. I decided to let her take the lead and instead used the opportunity to look over the meeting room. The scholars listening from behind her were making various expressions: one was observing the exchange in wide-eyed surprise, another was watching intently in an attempt to learn what he would be expected to do himself moving forward, and another was grimacing ever so slightly.

It came as a relief to see that Melchior looked genuinely interested.

After the discussion about Groschel settled down, I turned to Lutz. "Now, the matter of the printing industry. Lutz of the Plantin Company—is everything ready for the Kirnberger trip, as it was last year?"

"There are several points we would seek permission to change," Lutz replied, then took out his diptych. "The leave and return dates can remain as they are. However, Heidi from the ink workshop cannot accompany us. Because she is pregnant, she has asked to send her disciple instead."

Come again?! Heidi's pregnant?!

Josef would be staying behind as well to stop her from going crazy. Heidi was apparently bemoaning the poor timing of it all; she wanted to join the others so that she could witness the new resources and research, but sending her on a long-distance trip while she was pregnant was out of the question. She would end up giving birth in Kirnberger.

"Heidi has my leave to remain behind," I said. "I will consult Giebe Kirnberger

and ask that materials be sent back with you as a gift.”

“Your consideration is much appreciated,” Lutz replied with a half-smile. He must have envisioned Heidi quite literally jumping for joy. “Zack the smith also asked to send a disciple in his place; he is to be married during this year’s Star Festival.”

Aah, right. He’s around that age now.

Women of the lower city often got married before they turned twenty—much like women in noble society. Commoner men, on the other hand, tended not to get married until their early twenties. This was a bit later than their noble counterparts but only because it generally took them longer to earn enough to support a family. Johann and Zack had been on the verge of becoming adults when I first met them, so it made sense that they were now reaching the prime age for getting married.

“How fares Johann?” I asked. His personality had made it hard enough for him to secure a patron; I couldn’t help but worry that his neuroticism would affect his love life too.

Lutz gave a brisk nod. “His Star Festival will be two years from now at the earliest. I’m told he will be marrying the foreman’s granddaughter once she comes of age.”

Oh, so he does have a partner. I guess that makes sense, considering his amazing talents. I understand the foreman not wanting to let him go.

“Johann has requested to bring his disciple Danilo this year,” Lutz continued. “He wishes to secure time to train him for a handover, as he knows from experience the hardships of dealing with other workshops.”

“Zack and Johann both have my leave,” I said. “Please ask Ingo to bring a disciple as well. I intend to order from him furnishings for Groschel’s inn and bookshelves for my library.”

Because the aub was leading this reconstruction, as his adopted daughter, I needed to have my personnel take part as well.

“I will be leaving for Kirnberger after the Central District’s Spring Prayer is complete,” I announced, “so tell everyone to have their disciples ready for their

first long-distance trip. I should note that we will once again be using this opportunity to exchange personnel with Hasse's orphanage, so please arrange for the usual carriages and guards to be hired."

"Understood," Lutz said with a nod, writing everything down.

Melchior gave us a curious look. "There's another orphanage?"

"Indeed," I replied. "There is an orphanage in Hasse, a neighboring city. It works closely with the citizens there, so its culture varies somewhat from our own. We exchange five or so gray priests each year, and their influence remains positive for us both."

Children could receive a much better education at the Ehrenfest orphanage; books were always close at hand, and plenty of the gray priests and shrine maidens there had once served as attendants. Hasse's orphanage had its own benefits as well, though; it offered an environment rarely visited by nobles, which meant they could socialize with commoners, keep farms, and so on.

"I want to visit this second orphanage at least once," Melchior said.

"If you can get our father's permission, then I will take you there during Spring Prayer."

"Really? I can go?"

"I am sure he would grant you permission to observe Hasse's Spring Prayer, tour the monastery's orphanage, and then return with one of your retainers on their highbeast. Nothing bad could come from learning more about Spring Prayer and how rituals are performed." I turned to Lutz and Tuuli. "Merchants and craftspeople use family connections to see how trades are done ahead of time, do they not?"

They nodded.

"Seeing the work being done with your own eyes is more inspiring and provides a great chance to familiarize oneself with the job," Tuuli said, smiling. "It really is important."

Lutz quickly took out a board, as if realizing that this was a perfect opportunity. "We hope to have children interested in becoming apprentices at

the Plantin Company tour the workshop. Might we receive your permission?”

“There is *technically* a rule that forbids pre-baptism children from entering the temple...” I answered—but then I saw a familiar name among the list of apprentice hopefuls.

BWUH?! “Kamil”?! Am I seeing things? I’m not! Is it really him?! Is it just someone else with the same name?!

I stared at Lutz, doing all that I could to prevent the emotions flooding through me from showing on my face. The hint of pride in his jade-green eyes made it clear to me: this was my Kamil.

Wooow! He’s already old enough to start looking for apprentice jobs! I knew that, but, at the same time... Wow! This really is a surprise!

In my head, I still saw Kamil as a toddler, always stumbling around in his lumpy diaper. I hadn’t even known that he was hoping to join the Plantin Company as an apprentice.

I want to permit this. So, so, so bad. I want to do it right now.

However, this wasn’t a decision to be made lightly. Kamil wasn’t the only name on the list; I needed to make sure we would be able to host any other applicants as well.

“I shall look into this,” I replied.

“We are grateful.”

Assuming that Kamil does become a Plantin Company apprentice, that would give me a good excuse to meet with him, right?! WOO-HOO! Praise be to the gods!

An ordonnanz flew into the room just as a storm of blessings whirled inside my heart. The merchants not used to these white birds recoiled a little, while we nobles extended our arms and waited to see on whom it would land.

Hartmut was the intended recipient.

“This is Clarissa,” the ordonnanz said.

But how?!

Ordonnanzes couldn't cross duchy borders, which could only mean one thing: Clarissa was in Ehrenfest at this very moment. How, though, when we had only been told about her departure this morning?

"I just arrived at Ehrenfest's west gate," the bird continued, "but the guards aren't letting me through. Nobles from other duchies require a permit from the aub, apparently. What should I do?"

THE WEST GATE?! She's not just in Ehrenfest—she's right on our doorstep! Holy crap, this is scary!

Hartmut and I exchanged looks. We were all surprised, merchants and scholars alike. My excitement over possibly meeting with Kamil had been blown away in an instant, replaced only with shock, fear, and confusion.

Geez! Now I know why Ferdinand and the others always ended up with headaches during my rampages. I need to take Clarissa by the reins and get her back under control.

It was clear to me now: I needed to be like Ferdinand! I shot my head up, and Hartmut swiftly presented me with the ordonnanz's feystone. A quick tap of my schtappe turned it back into a bird.

"This is Rozemyne," I said. "Clarissa, obey the soldiers and stay where you are. If you defy them, I will have you sent straight back to Dunkelfelger."

I swung my schtappe and sent the ordonnanz flying off. Then I turned to Cornelius, who was standing behind me, and got him to summon Damuel and Angelica. They came briskly into the room.

"Clarissa is too much for the soldiers to handle on their own for much longer," I told them. "Hurry to the gate and take control of the situation, then have Clarissa wait for my arrival. I will leave as soon as this meeting is over."

"Understood!"

She Arrived Immediately

My ordonnanz was en route to the west gate, as were Damuel and Angelica. Hearing my order would probably stop Clarissa from making any unreasonable demands of the soldiers or turning this into an even bigger mess. And with the gate's emergency dealt with, next up was tackling the nobility's side of things. I would need to send word to Sylvester.

"Hartmut, contact Aub Ehrenfest," I said.

"Understood," Hartmut replied with a brisk nod, then exited the room. This was a matter to do with his fiancée, and his recent work with Sylvester meant that he was better equipped for the task than anyone else. If an ordonnanz didn't work, Hartmut would likely head straight to the castle.

That was the most I could do for now. I shook my head to dispel any lingering thoughts of Clarissa, sat up straight, and then resumed our meeting with the merchants. I couldn't leave until we had covered everything of importance.

The guildmaster met my gaze and then searched for words while eyeing the surrounding scholars. "Lady Rozemyne, it appears that something urgent has occurred; shall we take our leave?"

Some of the scholars almost nodded in response, but I firmly shook my head. "No, let us finish our discussion now. You are all going to be very busy preparing for the merchants visiting this summer and the second stores in Groschel, are you not?"

"We are grateful for your concern, but..." He hesitated, then continued in a more reserved tone, "I do believe I heard the name 'Dunkelfelger.'"

A scholar nodded. "This man is entirely correct, Lady Rozemyne. A noble from Dunkelfelger clearly takes priority over a meeting with merchants. We can summon them again later."

"No," I repeated. "Groschel's renovation is already fast approaching. If we wish it to succeed, we cannot waste the valuable time of those who will actually

be carrying out the preparations. Failure will harm not only the merchants with stores in the lower city but Aub Ehrenfest and Giebe Groschel.”

Brunhilde looked up with a start. She understood, but many of the scholars were still unconvinced, set in their belief that nobles should be prioritized over commoners. I sighed, then looked at her. She nodded in response before addressing the room.

“Everyone, Lady Rozemyne is not acting out of mere deference to the merchants; Aub Ehrenfest is directing the reconstruction of Groschel, and any discussions about it will require Lady Rozemyne and me—as well as many others—to be present. Her point is that, with Ehrenfest in its current state, there is unlikely to be a time when our schedules overlap again.”

Brunhilde needed to arbitrate between Giebe Groschel and Aub Ehrenfest, work with Charlotte to assist Florencia with her duties, *and* prepare for her own ascent to second wifedom. She would greatly benefit from making friends in the right places before coming into power.

“To my knowledge,” she continued, “Lady Rozemyne is going to be quite busy with religious ceremonies moving forward. By royal decree, she is also due to attend the Starbind Ceremony of the coming Archduke Conference. By the time she has returned from all that, the merchants from other duchies will already be arriving. There is absolutely no need for Lady Rozemyne, an archduke candidate, to change her current plans for the sake of an archnoble—especially one who has appeared on such short notice. Is that not the case?”

And with that brilliant performance, Brunhilde won the scholars’ agreement. My way of phrasing things meant I always struggled to convince nobles, but she had succeeded with aplomb. I would need to learn her talents myself.

At the same time, however, I wanted the scholars to understand that not giving the merchants enough time to complete their jobs would cause Giebe Groschel and the aub to fail spectacularly.

“Clarissa of Dunkelfelger will manage just fine with my retainers hosting her,” I said. “Furthermore, Aub Ehrenfest has been contacted. I expect he will ensure that something is done about all this.”

I was sympathetic to the soldiers manning the gate who were now having to

deal with Clarissa, but they wouldn't need to hold out for too much longer. Damuel and Angelica weren't the type to lord themselves over commoners, so their arrival would make things a lot more manageable.

I continued, "I shan't bring this meeting to a premature end, but I *would* appreciate a swift conclusion. Gustav, I must ask that you report on concrete solutions to the problems mentioned in autumn."

In the autumn, the merchants would put forward any issues they had experienced, then they would propose their solutions come spring. It was wonderful to see how much they improved each year. I asked them what changes they hoped to make this time, their sales figures for last year, and their goals for this year. Freida always seemed overjoyed when she met the targets that were set for her; seeing her enthusiasm each summer was heartwarming.

"Oh, also," I said, "I have an important message for the Plantin Company."

"And what might that be?" Benno asked. His tone was polite, but I could tell from the way he was leaning forward that he was expecting the worst. I didn't think he needed to be so on edge about a simple message.

"The other day, the aub informed me of the will of our duchy's nobles. I have accepted it and hereby permit you to sell the many educational materials that were previously forbidden from being distributed to nobles of other duchies: picture-book bibles, karuta, playing cards, and so on."

Ehrenfest no longer wanted to climb the duchy rankings, and this decision seemed ideal for supporting the adults' decision without wasting the hard work and enthusiasm of the students. If the general consensus was for us to reduce the gap between our grades and those of the other duchies, then we simply needed to bring them closer to our level. Scoring between ninety and a hundred on every test only made us stand out when the average score was like seventy.

In short: rather than dragging ourselves down, we'll pull everyone else up. Eheheh.

"In the right hands, I expect these products to generate enormous profits," I said.

"I have known that since the day I purchased the rights to them from you,"

Benno replied with a grin, his eyes like those of a capitalistic carnivore about to pounce on its gold-plated prey. He might as well have cackled, "I'm gonna be rich!"

Seeing him so enthusiastic, I couldn't help but grin in response.

Thus concluded our meeting. Brunhilde's group returned to the castle, while I went to my High Bishop's chambers.

"Lady Rozemyne, we have word from the High Priest," Monika said upon my arrival; she hadn't accompanied us to the meeting.

As it turned out, Hartmut had departed for the castle after all. That was understandable; he needed to report the current situation to the archduke, figure out why his bride-to-be hadn't waited at the border gate, consult his parents on what to do with her, and get the aub's permission for her to enter the city. Even if we went to meet her, we wouldn't be able to get her through the gate on favoritism alone; Sylvester's authorization was absolutely essential.

"Then let us wait for Hartmut to return," I said. "The soldiers would only be thrown into disarray if we headed to the gate without the form necessary for Clarissa to come through."

I sent Hartmut an ordonnanz, informing him that our meeting with the merchants was over and stating that I wanted him to return to the temple before going to fetch Clarissa. His response came immediately.

"I am on my way with my parents."

"Our apologies for the trouble, Lady Rozemyne," Hartmut's parents said upon their arrival. It seemed more accurate to say that *I* was causing *them* trouble, though, since Clarissa was only here to become my retainer.

"Hartmut, what did the aub say?" I asked.

"He was unaware of Clarissa's arrival when I sent my ordonnanz. The Knight's Order had gone to investigate a tool-produced rott sent up by the soldiers of the west gate, and my correspondence arrived just as they returned to give their report."

Hartmut had ended up questioning Frenbeltaag and Dunkelfelger about the matter, and his search for whichever scholar had permitted Clarissa to pass through the border gate had kept him very busy indeed.

He continued, “According to Frenbeltaag’s knights, Clarissa appeared at the gate between their duchy and Old Werkestock with only a single guard knight.”

Clarissa had a travel permit from Aub Dunkelfelger, but she was an archnoble marrying into another duchy. Most would travel with their parents and an entire procession of carriages containing their things; it was unthinkable that she had arrived at the border gate alone and with just one guard. Dubious, the Frenbeltaag knights had contacted Dunkelfelger, asking whether this archnoble named Clarissa truly was from their duchy and whether she really had permission to marry into Ehrenfest.

Dunkelfelger had responded simply: “Clarissa is indeed an archnoble from our duchy, and she does have permission to marry the Ehrenfest archnoble Hartmut.” We would never know if the suspicious Frenbeltaag knights had worded their questions poorly or the Dunkelfelger scholar who had received them hadn’t known about Clarissa’s departure.

After receiving the confirmation they had wanted and checking the medal that Clarissa had brought to prove her identity, the Frenbeltaag knights had concluded that there was no reason to prevent the bride-to-be from continuing her journey to her new home duchy. They had given her permission to pass through their gate—though, due to the extremely suspicious circumstances, they had also assigned a guard of their own to watch her.

From there, Clarissa and her guard knight had flown straight to the Ehrenfest-Frenbeltaag border gate, not stopping even once. The brutal journey had pushed the knight to his absolute limits, to the point that he had collapsed almost immediately upon arriving at the gate. In his last moments before losing consciousness, he had declared only that Clarissa’s legitimacy was confirmed.

Of course, this assertion had done painfully little to help Clarissa’s case—especially when there was no bridal procession awaiting her at the gate. Frenbeltaag’s and Ehrenfest’s knights had all watched Clarissa and her guard knight with skepticism as the two chugged rejuvenation potions.

Hartmut continued, “They questioned our castle as well, asking whether Clarissa truly had permission to marry into Ehrenfest and whether the fact that nobody had come to welcome her indicated some kind of problem.”

By this point, Clarissa’s name had come up almost nonstop during emergency meetings, so a response had come immediately: “We have indeed received word from Aub Dunkelfelger that Lady Clarissa departed for Ehrenfest.”

Outside of extremely urgent scenarios, such communications were compiled and then reported all at once; after all, one could not inform the aub of every single ordonanz. Plus, the news that nobody had come to welcome Clarissa came as no surprise to the scholar in correspondence with the border knights—Hartmut and his parents had only been informed of her departure last night, so it was obvious that a bridal procession hadn’t yet been put together.

“The guards at the border gate, having determined that the aubs were in contact and agreement, decided to let Clarissa through,” Hartmut explained. “Only when she reached the city’s west gate was she finally stopped—as a noble from another duchy and without an entry permit from the aub, she did not have the necessary clearance to go any farther.”

Ever since the Count Bindewald incident, Ehrenfest had exercised a lot more caution when it came to letting nobles from other duchies into the city. That, coupled with the fact that we were all on high alert because of the winter purge, meant that not even nobles of top-ranking duchies were being allowed through. If not for these circumstances, Clarissa might have gotten all the way to the temple.

Everyone thought Clarissa was suspicious as heck, but she still got all this way. In a sense, that’s kind of amazing.

As I was admiring her exploitation of so many imperfect human systems, Hartmut’s father, Leberecht, frowned and sighed. “Our hands are tied now that she has come with both aubs’ approval. Sending her back would be equivalent to calling off the engagement entirely and dishonoring all parties in the process. All we can do now is welcome her into Ehrenfest and propagate the story that she raced here out of concern and respect for Hartmut and Lady Rozemyne.”

As he had said, sending Clarissa away now would shame both aubs who had

permitted the marriage, the border guards who had put their suspicions aside to let her through, the scholars who had responded to the guards' questions, Clarissa's parents for having let their daughter race off to begin with, and Hartmut's parents for having not been there to welcome her.

"Make no mistake," Leberecht continued, "we will thoroughly scold Clarissa for what she has done and send a formal complaint to Dunkelfelger. For the good of us all, however, we should disguise her arrival as a passionate quest to aid her fiancé in need rather than a misguided rampage performed during a fit of madness."

His position was the result of much discussion with Sylvester and Florencia, so I had no reason to refuse. He was also the head of the household that would be deciding whether to accept Clarissa.

"As we have decided to welcome her," he said, "we have no choice but to suffer the consequences. The question is how we shall treat her going forward. During our discussion at the castle, we concluded that it would be best to embrace her as a proper fiancée, give her a place in our estate, and entrust Ottilie with looking after her and bringing her home each day."

Hartmut would continue frequenting the temple, while Clarissa would instead accompany Ottilie to and from the castle.

Leberecht concluded, "We cannot send an archnoble daughter from another duchy to the temple. We hope you understand this, Lady Rozemyne."

"I do," I replied. "It was already my intention to have Clarissa work in the castle as a scholar. The archducal couple is tragically short-handed, no? Leberecht, I must ask that you train Clarissa and Philine to help lessen their burden."

Leberecht gave a slight frown. He was Florencia's scholar and already had more than enough on his plate, so this request to train not just Clarissa but Philine as well must have come as an unpleasant surprise. This called for an explanation.

"If all of my scholars are working in the temple, it is highly unlikely that Clarissa will agree to work in the castle. Plus, Clarissa is sure to feel more comfortable in the castle if she has at least one person she knows there with

her. She and Philine worked together at the Royal Academy during one of our joint research projects. They will also serve as good rivals for one another; Philine is a laynoble without too much mana, but she was trained by Ferdinand and is excellent at paperwork.”

Philine had generally focused on temple work, so having her work in the castle would surely be a good experience for her. My aim was for her to carry out various jobs in the castle while keeping an eye out for motivated, promising youths.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said, “I think Clarissa may lose her mind if she is unable to spend time with you...”

I paused for a moment. One solution would be to visit Clarissa at the castle on a semi-regular basis, but that would undo my efforts to prove that I didn’t want to become the next aub.

And then it hit me.

“In that case, every three days, I will listen to a report from her in my library.”

That should also give me a good excuse to sneak in some reading time.

Thus concluded our discussion. I sent an ordonnanz to the west gate, announcing that I would soon arrive, then made my way there in my highbeast. Gathered on the lookout was a large crowd consisting of Angelica, Damuel, Clarissa, her guard knight, and many soldiers.

Dad?!

I got out of my highbeast, trying to keep a smile from forming. Clarissa made to race over to me, but I raised a hand to stop her and then tapped my chest twice in salute to the lined-up soldiers.

“You have done well to stop an outsider noble from entering the city without a permit,” I said. “Your dedication to your duties is wonderful. As a member of the archducal family, I am proud of you all.”

Dad gave me a dutiful nod. “We managed simply because, when word of the emergency was sent, the commanders of the gates were all gathered together for our spring meeting about our posts being reassigned.” He then looked at the

other commanders. “Had she arrived any later, it would have been my problem to deal with.”

It was pretty clear what was going on here—Dad wanted me to stress that we nobles were satisfied with the soldiers’ response to this problem and wouldn’t be handing out punishments. One man in particular was quite obviously holding his stomach, though he was making an honest effort to pass it off as a salute. I could only assume he was the current commander of the west gate.

I took Clarissa’s entry permit from Hartmut, then presented it to the nervous commander. “This is a permit for Clarissa, approved by the aub himself.”

“So it is,” he replied. “She may now enter the city.”

“You soldiers have worked hard to protect Ehrenfest, and we would never punish you for that. In fact, I believe some praise is in order.” I took two large silvers from my pouch and put them in the commander’s hand. “It may not be much, but use it to reward the soldiers who have worked so hard for your sake. The aub has been informed of all you have done.”

I was trying to reassure the commander, but the mere presence of nobles was enough to keep him on edge. Thankfully for him, it was time for us to leave.

I tightened my expression and turned to Clarissa. No longer was her braid swaying freely at her back; it was now coiled behind her head, making her look more like an adult. It was a shame she wasn’t acting like one.

“Let us go, Clarissa,” I said. “We have much to discuss about the future.”

I didn’t intend to take her to the temple, so we went to my library instead. Lasfam welcomed us upon our arrival and poured us some tea. This estate had once belonged to Ferdinand, so it seemed like the perfect location for a Ferdinand-style scolding.

“Now, then...” I began. “Allow me to ask frankly: Why have you come here?”

Clarissa stiffened and said, “Because I thought I could be of use to you, Lady Rozemyne.” This evidently wasn’t the warm welcome she had expected.

Meanwhile, the guard knight waiting behind Clarissa was wearing an expression that screamed, “I told you so.” I could imagine she had tried time

and time again to stop her charge's rampage before ultimately accepting defeat and accompanying her as a guard.

"Was the plan not for you to come during the Archduke Conference?" I asked.

"I could not bear to wait that long. Plus, I heard Aub Dunkelfelger say that my early arrival would benefit you."

"So you decided to set off on your highbeast and come here without warning? Not only that, but you brought no luggage, carriages, or attendants, and didn't even think to meet with your parents on the way?" Saying it all out loud made me realize the true craziness of our situation.

Clarissa slumped her shoulders and hung her head, seeming to realize the true severity of her actions now that the moment had passed. "My apologies. People always tell me that I lose sight of my surroundings when I get invested in something... but, once again, I failed to heed their warnings."

Ngh... I've said those very same words on so many occasions!

I went quiet. How was I meant to scold Clarissa for doing something I was always guilty of myself...? Ottilie must have noticed my sudden hesitancy because she continued on my behalf.

"Changes of plan trouble all those involved, so be sure to provide plenty of notice in the future," she said. Then, she explained that this early departure would have forced us to gather at the border gate just as Spring Prayer was beginning and we needed to circle the Central District. "Hartmut was agonizing over how to resolve this overlap. As the High Priest, he could not afford to miss Spring Prayer; doing so would only increase Lady Rozemyne's burden as the High Bishop. Far from helping her, you were about to make things worse."

Clarissa paled. To most nobles, there were no important religious ceremonies between the spring baptisms and the Starbind Ceremony. She hadn't thought to consider what other duties the temple might perform.

"Furthermore," Hartmut said, "when you sent word of your arrival at the west gate, the archducal family was in the middle of a critical meeting with Ehrenfest's merchants. We had you wait so that it could continue, but I was required to leave midway through to question the aub and confirm the details

of the situation. That prevented me from performing my duties as Lady Rozemyne's scholar. Do you now understand the pain you caused me?"

Clarissa somehow went an even ghastlier shade of white, and she nodded over and over again. "I feel your pain as though it were my own," she practically chanted.

"I do not know what kind of understanding Hartmut and you have reached," Leberecht said, "but I hope you are aware just how many people you have troubled. A normal bride-to-be does not intimidate border guards or appear so suspicious that the castle officials of not just one but *two* duchies are consulted about her legitimacy. Both aubs were forced to deal with the consequences of your actions, as were so many knights."

"The aubs were...?"

"Aub Dunkelfelger used the method of emergency communication between aubs to inform us of your departure. You will need to apologize to him and Aub Ehrenfest both in the future."

"My, erm... My sincerest apologies..."



Only after Clarissa had completely shrunk into herself did Leberecht inform her that she would be allowed to stay in Ehrenfest and not be turned away. Then, as we had discussed, he said that she was to move into Hartmut's estate as his fiancée and commute to the castle with Ottilie. There, Clarissa and Philine would work under Leberecht as scholars.

"May I work in the temple instead?" Clarissa asked. "I wish to be useful to Lady Rozemyne."

"You may not," I replied without missing a beat. "I require not a blue shrine maiden but a skilled, top-ranking scholar who can take on the work done in the castle."

Clarissa froze, taken aback by my immediate rejection, then looked at Hartmut. "But I heard that the temple needed more people."

He shook his head. "No matter how great the demand for new priests and shrine maidens may be, we could never have you serve as a blue shrine maiden—not with how other duchies view their temples."

Clarissa had come to Ehrenfest as Hartmut's fiancée, so it was easy to imagine how her parents would react to her being made a blue shrine maiden and thereby unable to get married. Sending an adult woman from another duchy to the temple would also cause more bad rumors about Aub Ehrenfest to circulate.

"Tell me, Clarissa—what would society say about Hartmut's parents if they sent you to be a blue shrine maiden?" I asked. "By entering the temple, you would cater to nobody's interests but your own. Furthermore..." I paused to look between Clarissa and her guard knight. "Ferdinand, who is still only a guest in Ahrensbach, has received an order from Lady Detlinde to perform Ahrensbach's Spring Prayer. That is no way to treat someone from another duchy who is waiting to be married, is it?"

Clarissa's guard knight looked especially shocked. It was as if she couldn't believe that Ferdinand wasn't being treated as a proper guest and groom-to-be.

I continued, "Aub Ehrenfest is infuriated that Ferdinand is receiving such poor treatment and is preparing to protest during the upcoming Archduke

Conference. We cannot risk acting like hypocrites before then.”

“But nothing is being forced upon me,” Clarissa protested, fixing me with a determined stare. “I am requesting this.”

“Such minor details would not matter to outsiders; they would see only that you have been forced into the temple, and any attempts to explain the situation would fall on deaf ears. If anything, they would assume that we told you to deny it. I experienced this myself during tea parties at the Royal Academy.” My failed attempts to dispel the bad rumors plaguing Sylvester were still fresh in my mind.

Clarissa was all too familiar with noble tea parties and the persistence of the rumors that spread through them. She bit her lip, cast her eyes down, and murmured, “I truly wished to be useful to you, Lady Rozemyne...”

“And I truly appreciate that fact. Ferdinand himself acknowledged the quality of your research; I do not doubt that, when it comes to scholars, you are among the best of the best. Please join Philine in the castle as one of my own scholar retainers.”

Clarissa stared at me for a moment. Then she stood up, came over, and respectfully knelt before me. “Your wish is my command. I came to Ehrenfest to be useful to you, and that is what I shall do.”

“Though you are forbidden from visiting the temple, I will create opportunities to meet with you. Barring the time I am away for religious ceremonies and the like, we shall convene here every now and again, and each time you shall give me a report. I will prepare delicious sweets as well.”

“Yes, my lady!”

And so it was decided: after barging her way into Ehrenfest, Clarissa was to be looked after by Hartmut and his family.

“Incidentally...” Ottilie interjected, “when is your luggage going to arrive, Clarissa?”

Nobody had an answer.

Melchior and Spring Prayer

Just as I'd requested, Clarissa began working in the castle with Philine. Matthias and Laurenz were instructed to continue working with the Knight's Order, while Brunhilde was taking Bertilde with her on trips to and from Groschel. All in all, my retainers were quite busy.

And, as expected, so was I.

Ferdinand had been doing about half of the High Bishop's workload before his departure, and it wasn't an option to dump that all on Hartmut. My intention was to complete it all myself, but that was proving even harder than I'd anticipated—only as my time continued to slip away between discussions with Elvira about printing industry minutiae and preparations for our trip to Kirnberger did it occur to me just how much Ferdinand had been supporting me when it came to the noble side of things. Each day was as frustratingly busy as the last, overrun with scheduling and other fine details.

I know this isn't possible, but... Ferdinand! Please come back!

On the day after the spring baptisms, we were going to receive a visit from the Gilberta Company. Because I was going to be ordering new outfits and hair ornaments, they had even requested that Mom be allowed to attend the meeting. In their words, they thought it best to change the designs and the colors of the dyes to complement how much I'd grown.

Craftspeople who hadn't learned how to interact with nobles couldn't be brought to the castle, but the temple had areas that commoners could enter. That was where they had asked to meet, to my immediate agreement.

"Lady Rozemyne," Hartmut said, "would the orphanage director's chambers not be more accessible to commoner craftspeople? Someone unable to visit the castle would surely struggle in the noble section of the temple."

He made a reasonable point, so I agreed that I would order my clothes there instead. The fact that he always picked up on these little details made him feel

so reliable, which compelled me to ask about permitting Kamil to tour the temple, despite Fran and Zahm having said that pre-baptism children weren't allowed inside.

"I would appreciate being able to grant the Plantin Company's request, if possible," I said.

Hartmut lowered his eyes in thought, then hesitantly said, "That would not be wise." Fran and Zahm both gave looks of relief.

"Is that because pre-baptism children can't be let into the temple?" I asked quite aggressively.

Hartmut shook his head. "No, my lady. I do not care about that in the least. Rather, we are receiving more apprentice blue priests, and Lord Melchior is going to be visiting with his retainers on a regular basis. If our visitors were put in a position wherein they were treated unfairly, would you be able to act as a member of the archducal family? Or would you forget everything in your rush to protect the commoners? If you care for this Plantin Company, I would advise not putting them in unnecessary danger."

He's right! I would forget everything!

If something were to endanger Kamil, I wasn't at all confident that I wouldn't lose control to protect him. Seeing someone treat him as subhuman or expect him to follow unreasonable orders simply because he hadn't yet been baptized would cause me to leave noble etiquette by the wayside.

"I understand," I said. "I will apologize to the Plantin Company for my lack of strength."

Bwehhh... Kamil is going to be so disappointed. If it's any consolation, I'm super sad too.

As I drooped my head and continued my desk work, Hartmut called my name, sounding a little apprehensive. "It might be worth noting that... it would be relatively safe if they came before Spring Prayer, which is when more nobles will start visiting."

"High Priest!" Fran and Zahm exclaimed, wide-eyed.

Hartmut responded with a casual, completely unperturbed smile. “There is no helping it,” he said. “My duty is to grant Lady Rozemyne’s every wish.”

Holy cow! Hartmut’s actually super cool?! Though, um... he’s still kind of weird too.

Fran and Zahm were forced to accede to Hartmut, so I received permission for Kamil to visit the temple. That was great, but... I was currently treading the very fine line that Ferdinand had drawn for me, and the thought of diverging from it made my heart race. A chill ran down my spine as I was struck with the urge to exercise restraint and not take this final step.

“O-On second thought, let us not. I do not want to risk endangering the Plantin Company.”

“Now that *is* a shame,” Hartmut said.

“Wait, why are *you* disappointed...?” I asked. I was giving up the chance to see my little brother by blood, but I didn’t understand why Hartmut would care.

He gave an exceedingly fishy smile, and a glint appeared in his orange eyes. “Oh, I meant nothing in particular.”

He definitely meant something! That look in his eyes is terrifying! Run, Kamil! Run!

Our final conclusion was that Kamil would tour the workshop only once he was baptized and formally working as a Plantin Company apprentice. I was a little sad about this, since I had been looking forward to seeing him, but it came as a relief to know that I was protecting my darling little brother from Hartmut and the other nobles.

“Blessed be the melting of the snow. May the Goddess of Spring’s boundless magnanimity grace you.”

It was the day of my meeting with the Gilberta Company, and I’d arrived at the orphanage director’s chambers with only female guard knights and attendants. Corinna had stepped forward and given the usual merchant greeting. Tuuli was standing among the many seamstresses behind her—and so was Mom! It had been such a long time since I’d last seen her up close.

Heeey, Mooom. Long time no see. Look over here. Oh, our eyes just met!

Mom offered me a gentle smile. She was staying at the back of the group, but just seeing her face again warmed my heart. My eyes barely strayed from her as the seamstresses measured me all over.

In the meantime, Lieseleta—who was by this point very used to doing business with the Gilberta Company—spoke with Corinna about what outfits I would need. Gretia listened carefully all the while.

“Might I assume that Lady Rozemyne’s spring outfits will need to be altered as well?” Corinna asked. “If we want to lengthen her garments, then we will either need to add some lace or replace the bottom part entirely.”

“Indeed,” Lieseleta replied. “In addition, would you be able to replace the buttons on the back with laces?”

Once the measuring was complete, I started to discuss hairpins with Tuuli. Leonore and Judithe must have been interested in our conversation; they were standing behind me, but I could feel their eyes on my back. Angelica was guarding the door, as always, so she wasn’t nearby.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Tuuli said, “I see that your facial features have matured as well. Do you have anything in mind for your summer hairpin? Are there any particular flowers you would like me to use?”

“My tastes are largely the same, so you may choose whichever flowers will suit me as I am now. If possible, I would like them to match the dyed cloth.”

The summer cloth had yet to be dyed, and my intention was to bring Mom into our conversation. Rather than coming over, however, she simply received the message through Tuuli. She hadn’t been taught the proper language and attitude to adopt when speaking with nobles, so this was the only way we could communicate when my noble retainers were around. I understood that there was no avoiding it—we couldn’t risk her being rude or impolite in some way—but it was tragic all the same.

At least I get to see her. I won’t even get that much with Kamil...

Once we had finished discussing my hairpins and winter outfits, Monika stepped forward and requested that Corinna alter my High Bishop robes as

well. “The ceremonial robes must be completed before Spring Prayer,” she said. “As for the everyday robes, they would ideally be altered during Spring Prayer, when she will not need them.”

Corinna wrote everything down in her diptych. She was going to have her hands full, what with needing to complete my summer outfits before the end of spring.

Though the ceremonial robes shouldn't be too bad; she only needs to lengthen them, not make them anew.

“These are charms I am giving to all of my personnel,” I said. “I offer them to Corinna and my Renaissance. Please try to keep them on you at all times.”

“We are honored.”

I gave charms to Mom and Corinna, thereby concluding our meeting.

As the days passed, more and more carriages came to the temple, bearing furniture for the apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens who would be attending Spring Prayer. It wasn't long before I saw Melchior's attendants, busily making sure that his furnishings were brought inside and arranging his room.

“Rozemyne.”

“Welcome, Melchior.”

Two days ago, I had received word that Melchior would be visiting the temple to check on his room. His noble and temple attendants were busy discussing the matter, so I got him to offer two small feystones' worth of mana to a divine instrument; he needed to begin with smaller amounts that wouldn't place too great a strain on his body.

Once the mana offering was complete, we drank tea together—leaving Melchior with an empty stomach would put him at risk of collapsing. In all things, negligence was one's greatest foe.

“The Othmar Company has sent a chef to be trained,” I said. “He is currently at work in my kitchen, but he will start making food in yours once he has

learned the fundamentals.”

“Right. Also, I asked Father whether I could come with you for Spring Prayer. He said that I’m not allowed to stay overnight.”

We needed carriages to transport our temple attendants, as well as ingredients and chefs to prepare them. It was costing enough time and money to prepare Melchior’s chambers in the temple, so Sylvester had decided against spending even more to give him Spring Prayer accommodation.

Plus, he barely has any retainers his age.

Melchior had three elder siblings, so there weren’t many student retainers left over for him to choose from. As I recalled, there were only two, both of whom were younger than I.

He continued, “I thought that riding on my retainer’s highbeast and coming back the same day would be enough to get his permission, but he asked how I planned to go without ceremonial robes to wear. Wilfried told me I can just borrow your blue robes, but... Can I...?”

“You can, but they’re covered in flowers. Wilfried got his own robes made just so that he wouldn’t need to wear them.”

“Oh... Flowers,” Melchior repeated. He made a strange face, then appeared to steel his resolve as he said, “Please lend them to me. Charlotte said that, once I start participating in ceremonies, we’ll be working too hard for me to sit back and observe. She told me I should take this opportunity to watch you perform, since there’s so much I can learn from you.”

Wait, what? Charlotte’s praising me?! Melchior sees me as a role model?!

It was settled, then: I needed to try extra hard. I got Monika to fetch the carefully stored blue robes, then lent them to Melchior.

“So I can watch the ceremonies now?” he asked.

“That’s right,” I said. “Be sure to watch closely. You’re the next High Bishop, after all.”

Days after Melchior’s visit, Frietack was released. I climbed into my highbeast

and headed to the Knight's Order for the handover, then flew him back to the temple. Kampfer seemed more pleased about having his colleague resume his old workload than Frietack did about having avoided punishment.

Frietack thus became a blue priest who would need to earn his own money instead of receiving support from his house. He wasn't going to be much worse off, though—not when he was receiving funding from the aub, income from the Harvest Festival, money for his work, and a little extra for transcribing books I borrowed from the Royal Academy. That realization only made him more determined to work his hardest.

This year, because he hadn't been afforded any time to prepare, Frietack was going to stay at the temple and do desk work instead of participating in Spring Prayer.

"After we leave, Wilfried and Charlotte will come to fetch chalices," I said. "Please ensure they receive them."

Wilfried and Charlotte were going to be visiting all of the provinces except Kirnberger. Frietack's duty was to give them the chalices they would require. It wouldn't be too complicated—every count received three, every viscount two, and every baron one—but he was likely feeling very tense about interacting with the archducal family. Hartmut would have managed this without issue, but he was absent at the moment; he had gone with his family and Clarissa to the border gate to apologize to Frenbeltag and collect his bride-to-be's luggage.

The temple was going to be busier than ever during Spring Prayer, so I had contacted Florencia and asked her to return Philine to the temple for that period. I wasn't sure how Philine would feel about that; apparently, she was overjoyed to be doing transcriptions again.

I totally understand. Transcribing is so much more fun than normal work, isn't it?

Philine and Clarissa were meeting me in my library every now and then to give me reports, and it was clear to me that they were working hard. As an adult, Clarissa was going to be attending the Archduke Conference, so she was trying to memorize as many documents that might help her negotiate with Dunkelfelger as she could.

“For your sake, Lady Rozemyne, I will pour my heart and soul into ensuring that Ehrenfest receives the most favorable terms,” she had said.

Clarissa was fishing through papers with an almost demonic countenance and asking questions about even the slightest concerns, and her enthusiasm was apparently contagious. Philine told me that Clarissa had a habit of delving into the most trivial-seeming details, which was really influencing the younger scholars.

Philine couldn't attend the Archduke Conference, so she was primarily taking care of day-to-day matters. They weren't too unlike the work she did in the temple, so she wasn't having much trouble with them. She also had plenty of opportunities to converse with Rihyarda, through which she had found out about a fairly intense shouting match between Wilfried and Sylvester the other day. Rihyarda had said that such behavior was normal for boys who were Wilfried's age, but she was still very worried.

I wonder... is Wilfried going through a rebellious phase?

I was already well aware of how annoying boys could get when they reached a certain age—my time as Urano had made sure of that. It probably wasn't the same for all boys, but they tended to adopt razor-sharp attitudes. It really made me not want to be around them.

As always, Spring Prayer began with my seeing off the carriages. In them were my attendants, gray priests, chefs, food, and clothes. I watched as they shrank into the distance, while Dad and a bunch of other soldiers guarded them.

Hasse's monastery had already received word from the Plantin Company that Melchior was due to visit. Everyone there was presumably busy with their preparations.

From there, I returned to the High Bishop's chambers. Kampfer came to see me before leaving for the Central District; I gave him a mana-packed feystone and the big chalice, then saw him off.

It wasn't until after lunch that Melchior and his retainers arrived and we started toward Hasse. Accompanying me in my Pandabus were Melchior, one of his guard knights, Fran, Angelica, and a box of potions.

Damuel and Angelica were guarding me for this year's Spring Prayer. Cornelius had wanted to come too, but I'd ordered him to prepare his estate for his new life with Leonore. He had tried to argue that I needed to bring as many guards as possible during this tumultuous period, but there wouldn't be enough rooms to accommodate so many noble knights, and I refused to listen to anyone complain about being "too close to commoners."

Cornelius really wanted to prioritize my safety over preparing his estate, but I wasn't going to accept that. For good measure, I told him to return home to see Aurelia and her baby, then speak to Lamprecht about the current situation with Wilfried.

Being in Lessy meant our surroundings passed in the blink of an eye, and it wasn't long at all before we arrived at Hasse.

"Is that Hasse?" Melchior asked. "It's surprisingly close."

"It feels that way when traveling by highbeast," I said, "but carriages take a detour around the forest, so their journey takes much longer. On foot, it would take half a day."

I slowly began to descend while repeating what my attendants had said about the trip. The weather was good, so the plaza had already been prepared, and the citizens were all there waiting for us.

We landed in the plaza to excited cheers and fervent waving—a reaction that took Melchior by surprise. I prompted him to climb out of my Pandabus, then headed up to the stage to meet with the mayor.

"Lady Rozemyne," Richt intoned. "We have been waiting for you."

We exchanged greetings, then I said, "Richt, this is my little brother Melchior. He is here today to observe the ceremony." I told Melchior where to stand, then signaled Fran with a nod.

"Spring Prayer shall now begin," Fran announced. "Town chiefs, come to the stage."

Five people holding lidded, ten-liter buckets ascended the stage... and then faltered. The large golden chalice—that divine instrument known to all—was nowhere to be seen. They looked between me and where the chalice should

have been, clearly troubled.

I stood atop the stand and chanted, “*Erdegral*.” At once, the “missing” chalice appeared, and many of the spectators cried out in surprise—not just the people of Hasse but also the noble retainers who hadn’t participated in the Royal Academy’s Dedication Ritual. I paid them no mind and started praying to Flutrane.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side...”

The chalice flashed with golden light as I poured my mana into it. I continued the prayer, channeling mana into the vessel all the while.

“The Goddess of Earth Geduldh has been freed from the God of Life Ewigeliebe. I pray that you grant your younger sister the power to birth new life. I offer to you our joy and songs of glee. I offer to you our prayers and gratitude, so that we may be blessed with your purifying protection. I ask that you fill all the lives upon the wide mortal realm with your divine color.”

Fran then tilted the chalice and, as we had done the years before, poured a radiant green liquid into the town chiefs’ buckets.

“Praise be to Geduldh the Goddess of Earth and Flutrane the Goddess of Water!”

Yep. Homemade chalices work just fine.

I gave a satisfied nod, then noticed that Melchior was watching me with concerned eyes. “Rozemyne,” he said, “am I going to be able to make a chalice by next year?”

“Absolutely not,” I replied. “You must first obtain a schtappe at the Royal Academy. Besides, there is no need for you to learn to make chalices; Wilfried and Charlotte both use the divine instrument in the temple to perform their ceremonies.”

Amused, I produced my Pandabus and climbed inside. Melchior followed with his guard knights. It was a direct path from here to the monastery.

“We offered our mana to the divine instrument the other day, remember?” I

said. “If you make such offerings on a regular basis while praying to the gods, then the divine instrument’s magic circle will appear in your head whenever you wish to use it. There are some among my retainers who have learned to use the instruments themselves.”

“I can make Leidenschaft’s spear now,” Angelica interjected, her voice tinged with pride. She couldn’t maintain the instrument for very long, but she wanted to use it to perform the blessing ceremony. Her hopes and dreams didn’t end there, though—she also wanted to use that same spear to one day defeat Bonifatius. It was good to know that she had a lofty ambition to work toward.

“If you want to wield divine instruments yourself, Melchior, then you will need to work hard to compress your mana,” I said. “But offerings and prayer come first.”

“I’ll do my best!” Melchior exclaimed, brimming with determination. It was a good, honest answer.

Upon our arrival at the monastery, everyone came out to welcome us. I introduced Melchior, then we all went inside. The attendants would be preparing our rooms, so I decided to give a quick tour.

“Are there not any children here?” Melchior asked.

I shook my head. “Even the youngest apprentices are close to coming of age.”

We often only exchanged adults between Hasse and Ehrenfest, and even the former Hasse orphan Marthe was now close to coming of age. In other words, Melchior would struggle to find another kid.

“As a result of us archduke candidates circling the Central District, the harvest improved, and parents no longer found themselves needing to abandon their children,” I explained. “Had the winter purge not happened, I imagine there wouldn’t have been many children in Ehrenfest’s orphanage either.”

“Oh, I see...”

I showed Melchior the boys’ building where the soldiers were preparing to sleep, the workshop and its operations, then finally the great fields where the monastery farmed tasty vegetables.

“Melchior, this is your first time seeing a farm, is it not?” I asked. “This is how the produce you eat is grown. Vegetables from Hasse’s fields are positively delicious, and all sorts of goods can be gathered in the nearby forest. On that note, I think gathering in the noble forest would be a good experience for you.”

After finishing our casual tour, we went inside and had tea. The nobles and soldiers were seated at separate tables, but Melchior’s retainers looked surprised that we were even sharing the same dining hall. Their eyes kept flitting between Dad and the other soldiers’ tables and our own.

“Priests have separate quarters in the winter mansions and the summer estates of giebels,” I said, “but here in Hasse, we all eat together.”

“At the very least, could they not eat at another time...?” one of Melchior’s guard knights asked.

I gazed up at him with a smile. “Their opinions are much too valuable for that. It was here that I spoke with the soldiers and asked for their support in ensuring that the lower city’s *entwicken* succeeded.”

Melchior’s indigo eyes began to sparkle. His ravenous desire to be useful meant he was hanging on my every word.

“It was our father who made this place,” I said to him. “One of Aub Ehrenfest’s finest points is that he actually acknowledged the opinions of the people I encountered across the Central District and in this monastery. Rather than disregarding the commoners for being beneath him, he used their perspectives to strengthen the duchy. You would do well to emulate his good traits and become a High Bishop who can understand and draw value from the opinions of commoners, even after I depart.”

Melchior nodded solemnly.

The Disciples of the Gutenbergs

I brought Melchior to the table with Dad and the others, introduced him as the son of the archduke and the next High Bishop, then said that he would be speaking with them as my successor.

“Ah, so Lord Melchior is the one who will take your place when you come of age,” Dad said. “That is heartening to hear. We have found it much easier to coordinate with the archduke and the Knight’s Order thanks to these conversations with you. We found it very beneficial during the winter and when that noble from another duchy came to the western gate.”

Dad then looked at Damuel, who was standing behind me. “Might I use this opportunity to thank Lord Damuel in person? I don’t know when I’ll next have the chance.”

I turned around to see what Damuel thought. He seemed a bit troubled by the idea, but he didn’t speak out against it.

I returned my attention to Dad, ready to give him permission, only to find that he wasn’t the only person now focused on my knight. The soldiers *all* stood up, then knelt before the two of us.

“Though you said you were only acting on Lady Rozemyne’s orders, Lord Damuel, we soldiers of the lower city hold you in the highest esteem. Thank you.”

What in the world happened...?

Taken aback by this unusually intense thank-you, I turned to Damuel and Angelica. In retrospect, there was no point in expecting anything from Angelica; her head was profoundly empty, and her bright smile was a clear indicator that she had no idea what was going on.

“Gunther,” I said, “what was it that Damuel did, exactly?”

“I performed my duty and nothing more,” Damuel interjected.

“If that were true, I doubt the soldiers would have thought to thank you. As your lady, I absolutely *must* hear these tales of your heroics.”

Dad shot a glance at Damuel, who clearly didn’t want to discuss this matter, then began to explain. “In the winter, we received a command to stop any nobles from escaping through the north gate. The Knight’s Order distributed plenty of magic tools for us soldiers to use—so many that, by the time they were done, we each had one for summoning aid. The issue was that any fleeing nobles could simply mount their highbeasts and fly *over* the gate. Plus, even if we called for aid with our new tools, the north gate is at the very edge of the Noble’s Quarter; there was no guarantee that help would immediately arrive.”

During the winter, most of the Knight’s Order had mobilized for the purge. There were always two knights stationed at the north gate, but they alone wouldn’t have been able to stop the flood of escaping nobles. Thankfully, when the call for aid had come, Damuel had arrived immediately and before anybody else.

“It wasn’t anything special,” Damuel said modestly. “I was in the temple preparing for the Dedication Ritual, so I just happened to be close to the north gate.”

Though he was doing his best to downplay it, Damuel had arrived in a flash and attacked the fleeing nobles from behind, supporting the commoner soldiers who had wilted in the face of their onslaught. He had come across as quite the savior.

“Thanks to Lord Damuel, none of the soldiers manning the north gate sustained any fatal wounds,” Dad explained. “He was also first to arrive in response to the west gate incident. The soldiers are all extremely thankful.”

I was surprised to hear just how much Damuel had done—and just how much trust and gratitude he had earned from everyone as a result. Moved, I asked the soldiers to resume their seats. Then I asked about the status of the lower city and conveyed that Groschel would soon be reconstructed, which meant we were going to have enormous work orders for some of the craftspeople. Melchior listened as well, with great interest.

As I continued to speak with the soldiers, time got away from me. A retainer

whispered something to Melchior, who then rose from his chair and announced, “I must be going now; I promised Father that I would return in time for dinner. Rozemyne, thank you for today. I learned so much.”

“I was glad to see you showing such a thirst for knowledge,” I replied. “This is my gift to you, my hardworking little brother: a protective charm.” I’d given the charms for Wilfried and Charlotte to Philine so that she could distribute them before they left.

“Thank you very much,” Melchior replied, sounding all proper. “Also, I will speak with Father about what the soldiers said today. If you could check the accuracy of my reports upon your return, I would appreciate that greatly. Now, if you will excuse me.”

And with that polite farewell, he hurried up onto his retainer’s highbeast and went home.

Wait, what? He wants ME to check his reports? Am I just imagining it, or is Melchior waaay too mature? Am I actually doing a good job of being a reliable older sister?

I saw Melchior off, so in awe of his maturity that I started to feel uneasy about myself.

The next morning went as expected: I saw my attendants and chefs into a carriage, then watched as the gray priests started their return journey to Ehrenfest.

“Soldiers,” I said, “once again, I must praise your excellent guard work. Please accept this token of my thanks.”

I started to hand money to each of the soldiers. Then, when it came time to give Dad his share, I discreetly slipped him a pouch containing two charms as well. He seemed to notice right away and thanked me while sliding it into his chest pocket. Mom and Tuuli had already received their charms from me—and, since the commoner charms were all the same, Dad could just consult one of them if he wanted any help using his. I was also pretty confident that he would be able to guess whom he needed to give the second charm to.

From there, I continued to hand small pouches of money to the rest of the soldiers, keeping half an eye on Dad all the while. He barked for everyone to stand at attention and informed them that their job here wasn't yet done.

"We will see them safely to the temple," he assured me.

"Thank you, Gunther. I wish you a smooth journey."

It had only been brief, but I was glad to have had another opportunity to speak with Dad. I watched as he disappeared into the distance with his men and the carriage, then climbed into my highbeast and made my way toward the next winter mansion.

After finishing my assigned portion of Spring Prayer and returning to the temple, I sent word to the Plantin Company. I'd expected to need three days to recover from the trip, but I was feeling right as rain after only two; my health really was getting better, to the point that I no longer fell ill simply from traveling around.

On top of that, I was only bedridden three times while we were traveling around the duchy. Eheheh.

"Lady Rozemyne, the Gutenbergs have arrived," Gil announced. "Most of the luggage has been brought out of the workshop. We expect to be leaving soon."

At once, I exited the meeting room and started toward the front entrance, with my retainers who were accompanying me to Kirnberger and the scholars working in the printing industry in tow. Lieseleta and Gretia were serving as attendants; Hartmut and Roderick as scholars; and Cornelius, Leonore, and Judithe as guard knights. Judithe was still underage, but she was being allowed to tag along because Kirnberger was her home province.

Damuel and Angelica had circled the Central District for this year's Spring Prayer, so they were taking some well deserved time off. As for Ottilie and Philine, they were staying behind to keep Clarissa under control. To be honest, I wished that Hartmut were staying at the temple instead of coming with us, but he'd somehow managed to worm his way into our group.

He was right that I'll probably need an archscholar with me, but... I'm still not

too pleased about this.

Also coming with us were Henrik and the other layscholars already familiar with the printing industry. By this point, I recognized all of their faces. Muriella was going to be accompanying Elvira as her scholar; it was good to see that the printing knowledge she had acquired at the Royal Academy was benefiting her.

“I’ve been working really hard,” Judithe called to me with a proud smile, her orange ponytail swaying from side to side. “Ever since it was decided that Kirnberger would be our next destination, I’ve been gathering intelligence from Brunhilde and Leonore, and making arrangements through Theodore so that everything is ready for our arrival.”

Judithe went on to explain that she had told Giebe Kirnberger about the issues faced in Leisegang and Groschel—as well as how to avoid them.

“Giebe Kirnberger was very receptive,” she continued, “especially after learning that he would be blamed for any imperfections in the commoner craftspeople’s work environment.”

Brunhilde had apparently argued that there were no faults in the Gutenbergs’ teaching methods or the tools they brought with them, indicating the progress made in Illgner and Haldenzel as evidence. She had then stated that provinces only struggled to adopt the printing industry when they were unprepared or unwilling to learn. The problems faced in Groschel had apparently left a great impression on her.

“Kirnberger has everything ready for the Gutenbergs to do their jobs,” Judithe concluded.

“Excellent work,” I said. “That is wonderful to hear.”

Judithe puffed out her chest in response. Ehrenfest would only continue to improve now that we had more nobles bridging the gap between us and the commoners.

We headed through the front entrance to find the luggage all ready to be loaded and the Gutenbergs kneeling in very neat rows. Benno was acting as their representative; he greeted me and then turned to look behind him.

“Lady Rozemyne, please allow us to introduce the disciples who are

accompanying us for the first time,” he said. “Blessed be the waves of Flutrane the Goddess of Water who guided us toward this serendipitous meeting.”

I cast an eye over all those kneeling before me. The people behind the Gutenbergs were probably the disciples. They were all young boys who looked close to coming of age, and seeing them reminded me of Johann and Zack when I first met them.

“Ingo,” Benno called. The carpenter stood up in response, along with his disciple.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is my disciple, Dimo,” Ingo explained. “He has been involved in the creation of your printing presses since the very beginning. He knows everything there is to know about their design, and making them comes as easily to him as breathing.”

I took a closer look at Dimo and instantly recognized him. He was one of the carpenters who had been with Ingo back when he set up printing presses in the Rozemyne Workshop and Hasse’s monastery.

“Dimo, is it?” I asked. “I remember the extreme care with which you sanded down the temple workshop’s first printing press, all so that we wouldn’t need to worry about splinters. I was aware that Ingo had his eye on you but not that you were now trusted enough to join him on these excursions.”

Ingo and Dimo both stared at me, as if surprised that I remembered the young disciple. It was a pretty unnecessary reaction, if you asked me; I remembered everyone who had been involved in the making of that first printing press, in the same way that I remembered just how much its creation had moved me.

“I gave Dimo the printing press schematics,” Ingo said. “I also taught him the process and how to coordinate with the workshops of other provinces. As per your request, I’m going to stay in Ehrenfest and focus on my work here.”

“Indeed. Your task is going to require the collective efforts of every carpenter in the city of Ehrenfest. I trust you will once again demonstrate why I chose to give you my exclusive business.”

I also wanted Ingo to make bookshelves for my library, but that could wait. For now, he needed to focus on the competition between the carpentry

workshops as they all tried to make the best furniture for Groschel's high-class inns. They were going to be extremely busy in the lead-up to the autumn entwickeln.

"Dimo, I expect great things from you as well," I said.

"I will do my best to be recognized as a Gutenberg."

It was good to see him so motivated. I gave him an affirming nod just as Benno called for Josef. Ingo and Dimo knelt down again, while Josef and his disciple stood up instead.

"Lady Rozemyne, this is Horace," Josef said. "He is going to be replacing Heidi and me on this trip."

Horace was a completely new face to me. He certainly wasn't the craftsman I remembered seeing back when I visited Heidi at her ink workshop.

"He was chosen based on the fact that he can focus on his work without acting out or becoming absorbed in research," Josef noted. "He shouldn't encounter any issues when teaching others, and there's no risk of him becoming obsessed with new ink as Heidi would. Any research will take place back here in Ehrenfest, assuming any materials are brought back from Kirnberger."

Sending an ink fanatic like Heidi to Kirnberger would have been much too dangerous, especially if she had gone without someone to rein her in. That was why Josef had chosen Horace to go instead—he needed someone who could stand on an equal footing with the Gutenbergs and operate without constant supervision. His struggles as a husband never seemed to end.

"Josef," I said, "allow me to congratulate you on your wife's pregnancy. Has she calmed down at all, I wonder?"

"Thank you," he replied, then flashed me a look of complete exhaustion. "If she were the kind of person to exercise more caution now that she's with child, I would be going to Kirnberger instead of Horace."

It seemed that not even pregnancy could slow the unstoppable force that was Heidi. She had even wanted to come here today to greet me. The only reason

she had refrained was because Josef and Lutz had desperately explained that pregnant women weren't welcome in the temple.

"Horace, for Josef's sake, be sure to focus on your duties," I said with a smile. "Do not become so obsessed with research that you forget to eat."

Horace had seemed particularly tense, perhaps because he had yet to produce any meaningful results in the field of new ink. Seeing my smile made him relax, though, and he nodded in response.

After my conversation with Josef and Horace, it came time for Zack and his disciple to stand. "Lady Rozemyne, this is Sead," Zack said. "He may not be quite as skilled as Danilo, but his personality makes him the best person to arbitrate between Johann and Kirnberger."

Sead appeared to be amicable enough—a desirable trait for someone who was going to support Johann as he taught everyone how to make metal letter types. Putting two quiet, stubborn craftspeople together would have been a recipe for disaster, as even the smallest disagreement would have likely spiraled into complete chaos. Instead, Johann needed someone whom he could lean on and who would make his life easier for the next half year.

Zack continued, "To be honest, Lady Rozemyne, I simply think I can be of more use to you here in Ehrenfest." He was a creative through and through and excelled in designing schematics, so he wanted to spend his time inventing rather than managing Johann's interpersonal relationships.

Zack had accompanied us in the past—we wanted the nobles we were dealing with to recognize him as a Gutenberg—but he made a good point. He certainly would be better off staying in Ehrenfest and designing schematics.

"Perhaps I should give you a new order, then..." I mused aloud. "Ah, what am I thinking? You must be busy enough preparing for your marriage. The new inventions can wait until next year. Please focus on getting ready for your new life with your bride-to-be—and expect a flood of blessings on the day of your wedding."

Zack was the first of my Gutenbergs to be getting married—I would need to put my all into blessing him and his partner. He smiled in response and said that he would make sure to brag about it when the time came.

“Sead,” I said, “opportunities to experience the craftsmanship of other workshops are few and far between. You can expect to find things in Kirnberger that you would never encounter in Ehrenfest’s lower city. Be sure to absorb as much as you can.”

“Understood.”

The last to rise were Johann and Danilo. I was already familiar with Danilo—his name and progress had been brought up before—but this was the first time he was going on one of these trips.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Danilo,” Johann said. “I am bringing him with me so that he can learn to be my successor.”

“Can I take this to mean he has finally mastered making letter types?” I asked. I remembered hearing that Danilo had just barely failed to meet Johann’s expectations, but his presence here today must have been a good sign.

Johann nodded. “I intend to have Danilo do as much as possible while I take a back seat and focus on training Sead.” Rather than being entirely focused on honing his craft, he was now putting so much thought into training his disciple. Everyone had grown so much.

“We can never have enough skilled smiths,” I said. “I wish you luck in training both Danilo and Sead. You are the oldest of your peers, after all.”

Johann gulped—he had always left dealing with others to Zack—but then gave me a resolved nod.

I turned to his disciple. “Johann and the others have told me much about your growth, Danilo. Please continue to improve as one with my exclusive business.”

“Ever since our exchange with those craftspeople from Groschel, I’ve been asking to travel to other places,” Danilo said. Then, brimming with enthusiasm, he exclaimed, “That day has finally come! Now that I’ve come of age and secured a place on this trip, I promise to do my best!”

Danilo was the very antithesis of the quieter and more introverted Johann. It was so much fun comparing all of the craftspeople’s unique personalities.

Thus concluded our introductions. I distributed charms to the layscholars, as

well as to the retainers and the Gutenbergs. The nobles received different charms from the commoners, for obvious mana-related reasons.

“Consider these protective charms a show of my appreciation for your consistent hard work,” I said. “Now, let us prepare to leave.”

I made a huge Pandabus, then asked that the luggage be moved into it. The disciples followed the directions of the more experienced Gutenbergs and got straight to work. They appeared a bit hesitant, but the fact that they didn’t kick up a fuss seemed to indicate that they had been told what to expect.

The atmosphere was quite peaceful while the luggage was being loaded into my highbeast, but then we took off. No sooner were we airborne than Danilo began flailing his arms around, his face locked in a silent scream. He had picked a great time to learn that he was scared of heights.

Johann looked at his disciple, then put his head in his hands and said, “You could stop looking out the window to start with.” He seemed pretty exasperated, but it wasn’t that big of a deal.

Kirnberger's Country Gate

"Theodore, this is Judithe. We're almost there."

From the passenger seat of my Pandabus, Judithe sent an ordonnanz ahead to Kirnberger. By the time she received a response—an assertion that everything was ready for our arrival—the province's summer estate had already come into view.

"There it is," Judithe said. "The giebe should be waiting for us in the side building for priests."

We soon reached the summer estate and convened with Giebe Kirnberger, who had with him the two scholars in charge of the province's printing industry and several others. The giebe looked and carried himself a lot like a knight; he had a large, muscular build and a rather stern face. His father and predecessor had very openly maintained that Bonifatius was best suited to serve as Ehrenfest's archduke, and it seemed that his passion had rubbed off on his son. The current Giebe Kirnberger was said to hold Bonifatius in extremely high regard.

So he's a musclehead, I guess.

After we exchanged greetings, Giebe Kirnberger started giving instructions. Fran, Monika, and the chefs were to be guided to the side building for priests, while the scholars by his side would show the Gutenbergs to the lower city.

"As I understand it, the Gutenbergs have brought much luggage with them," Giebe Kirnberger said. "I think it would be best for them to go to the lower city first; the chalices and our meeting can come later. What do you think?"

"I agree," I replied. "The Gutenbergs will surely want to see their new accommodations. I thank you ever so much for being so considerate."

Fran and the others started moving our luggage, at which point Lieseleta approached me. "Lady Rozemyne," she said, "rather than venture to the lower city with the others, Gretia and I would like to prepare your chambers before

dinner. May we?”

I gave them permission—as attendants, they had their own duties to take care of—and they were led away by members of the estate. In the meantime, I asked the Kirnberger servants to help carry our luggage.

“Now, then—let us go to the lower city.”

Kirnberger’s lower city had seemed so very large and populous from above, but actually traveling through it revealed that not many people lived there. An almost eerie silence hung in the air.

“If your Gutenbergs have any issues, they need only let us know,” Giebe Kirnberger announced, then chuckled and said, “We have more than enough vacant buildings, so we can have them moved to another house in no time.”

The accommodations we were shown to looked perfectly fine, and the Gutenbergs promptly began moving their things into their new home and place of work. Gil and the other gray priests helped as well. Their movements were so smooth and elegant that, even without their robes on, they stood out a little here in the lower city.

Though, by the time we come to retrieve them, they always blend right in.

“I did not expect such a massive city to have so few residents. Is there a particular reason?” I asked the giebe, hoping to kill some time.

He gave me a warm smile, like an old man gazing upon his beloved granddaughter. “This city used to be so much more animated; there was international trade abounding and a never-ending flood of people going to and fro. But then, long ago, the ruling Zent sealed the country gate. It was a time before Ehrenfest, I should add. We were a province within the greater duchy of Eisenreich.”

“I was taught the history of Ehrenfest, but the name ‘Eisenreich’ received no more than a passing mention at the start...” I mused aloud. “I certainly didn’t know it was a greater duchy.”

If the country gate hadn’t been opened since the days of Eisenreich, then that meant it had been closed for at least two hundred years. Several of the other gates were closed too, but that was only because the missing Grutrissheit was

required to open them. The giebe assured me that Kirnberger had its own, unique reason for its gate being closed, and that alone filled me with excitement; I could smell one heck of a story.

Oh no. I'm starting to get too amped up. What should I do?

“Can you tell me more about these unusual circumstances?” I asked, staring up at the giebe. I couldn’t wait to find out more—but then Lutz announced that everyone had finished moving the luggage.

Giebe Kirnberger snorted in amusement and gazed toward the far end of the city. “Judithe did mention your interest in the country gate. How about we go there after we’ve discussed the printing industry? It should make an excellent backdrop for the tale.”

I'll need to get a notepad ready!

I smiled and gave a simple nod—though, on the inside, my heart raced at the very thought of learning a new story.

After showing the Gutenbergs to their new home, we visited the giebe’s summer estate. There, Benno and the Plantin Company discussed the establishment of guilds with Kirnberger’s scholars while I delivered the chalices to Giebe Kirnberger and concluded Spring Prayer. This was an annual occurrence for me, so I was more than used to it.

“Now, let us go to the country gate at once,” Giebe Kirnberger said.

I climbed into my Pandabus, then we were off. Seeing the province from above for a second time, I couldn’t help but compare it to Ehrenfest. The buildings were as one would expect—largely wooden structures built atop foundations of white stone—but everything else was backward. Back in Ehrenfest, reaching the aub’s castle would require one to pass through the lower city and then the Noble’s Quarter. Here in Kirnberger, however, the city’s entrance led straight into the Noble’s Quarter and to the giebe’s estate. The farther you ventured, the more common the city became.

“It intrigues me that Kirnberger has its estate so close to the front of the city...” I said. “The estates in Illgner, Leisegang, and Groschel are all much

farther back.”

“A long time ago, visitors from other countries used to flock to Kirnberger,” Judithe explained from the passenger seat. “As a result, the inns for foreign merchants and the homes for the commoners doing business with them were built on the side of the city closest to the country gate, with the giebe’s estate securely behind them. That’s what I was taught, anyway...”

All of a sudden, she pointed ahead of us. “Oh, there it is! Can you see that gate with a weird hue, on the other side of the white one made by the aub? That’s our destination!”

Beyond the white border gate, which looked just like the one leading into Ahrensbach, I saw another gate of a similar size. “Wow...” I murmured. “The ivory structures made by the aub are beautiful, but gates and walls made by the Zent are on another level entirely.”

The border gate and Kirnberger’s outer walls were pure white, like the walls around the city of Ehrenfest, but the structures beyond them blew me away. They shone with a faint, mother-of-pearl iridescence and seemed to stretch in both directions as far as the eye could see. It brought to mind the Great Wall of China, but rather than twisting and adapting to the contours of the land, it continued in an unnaturally straight line. A single glance was all that was necessary to realize it was an artificial creation, and seeing it was terribly disconcerting.

This border was definitely drawn by the first Zent.

It was taught in geography that Yurgenschmidt and the barrier around it were perfectly circular—like someone had pressed a round cookie cutter into a bigger continent—but this was my first time seeing the country’s border with my own eyes. I’d assumed it would be invisible like the borders of duchies, but even the walls were awash with a plethora of colors.

“The country gate truly is beautiful,” Judithe said. “You can’t really see it from within the city limits—the lower city’s wooden extensions get in the way.”

I remembered visiting Kirnberger during my first Spring Prayer, but I’d never seen the country’s border before; the lower city’s four-story buildings were about as tall as the gate, so it couldn’t really be seen from the giebe’s estate. Of

course, it probably hadn't helped that Ferdinand had been in charge of greeting the giebe, and most of my time had been spent drinking rejuvenation potions in the carriage or being told to keep my head down.

The grand white doors of the border gate were completely open, with what looked to be knights guarding it from the front. Farther beyond it were the iridescent, firmly closed doors of the country gate. They were covered with complex patterns that must have served the same purpose as the designs on Schwartz's and Weiss's clothes: disguising the magic circles beneath.

"Is the Kirnberger border gate always open like this?" I asked Judithe.

"No, today is a special occasion. According to Theodore, Giebe Kirnberger asked for the aub's permission to open it so that you could see the country gate. I'm so moved—I really wasn't expecting to see it up close like this!"

The border gate was said to be closed most of the time, meaning one rarely had a chance to see the country gate head-on.

"Even growing up in Kirnberger, all you ever see are the closed border gate and the walls around it," Judithe grumbled. "The border gate is basically the same height as the country one, so you'd need to stand at the perfect angle just to catch a glimpse of the colorful glow."

As a kid, Judithe had been desperate to see the country gate. Becoming a knight had simply been an excuse for her to get close to it.

She continued, "I got to see the country gate for the first time after getting a highbeast in the Royal Academy. It was so impressive that I almost cried. U-Um... By the way... This is true for most knights from Kirnberger. I'm not strange or anything. Theodore is the same way!"

Judithe's orange ponytail swished around as she repeated over and over again that she wasn't alone in her obsession. I could tell that she was wishing she hadn't revealed her entire motivation for being a knight, and seeing her trying to backpedal was amusing beyond words.

"Is that so?" I asked with a small smile. "But, as I recall, Theodore said that he wished to serve Giebe Kirnberger as his father does."

"Ngh... He was just acting cool. In truth, he feels the same way I do. Honest!"

She sounded so desperate that I decided to let it go for now.

I'll double-check with Theodore later.

“Lady Rozemyne, remember to land your highbeast *after* the giebe,” Judithe said.

I did as instructed and touched down atop the border gate. A few Kirnberger knights greeted us upon our arrival, waiting in a neat line, and among them I saw Theodore. I smiled at him, then he smiled back. It was good to see him enjoying his apprentice work.

“Lady Rozemyne, allow me,” Giebe Kirnberger said after I put away my Pandabus, then slowly escorted me to the edge of the gate. Perhaps because we were so high up, the wind was strong and very chilly. The country gate glimmered in front of us.

Border and city gates often contained several work and waiting rooms, but the country gate looked to be only three or four meters thick. Plus, while the roof of the border gate beneath me was flat and large enough for several knights and their highbeasts, its iridescent counterpart had a pitched roof. It hadn't been designed to be landed on.

“Beyond this point, we see what is known only to the knights of Kirnberger,” the giebe explained as we took one more step toward the edge of the gate. From there, we could see what existed beyond Yurgenschmidt—a sprawling ocean of sand. It reminded me of the dust that formed when something was completely empty of mana.

“I expected to see another country beyond the wall...” I said. “Didn't you say that Kirnberger used to trade with foreign visitors? Did their country run out of mana and end up a desert...?”

A small part of me didn't want an answer, especially when I thought about how much Ahrensbach was degenerating from its lack of mana. Maybe the neighboring country had turned to sand after the gate was closed.

Giebe Kirnberger shook his head and smiled. “No, I don't believe so. The country gate is a massive teleportation circle for connecting two countries. One cannot pass through it without the Zent's permission, no matter how much

mana one has. I only know this from tales that have survived the generations, but when the gate is open, there is an enormous magic circle that floats above it.”

Foreigners from other countries would teleport to Yurgenschmidt through the country gate, then pass through the border gate to enter Kirnberger. In short, one had needed the permission of the Zent *and* the ruling aub to access the province.

“Was there ever anyone who ended up stuck between the two gates?” I asked. “Perhaps someone who had permission from the Zent but not the aub.”

Giebe Kirnberger laughed; maybe he hadn’t expected such a question, or maybe he was imagining a merchant floundering between the two gates. “Perhaps a merchant that foolish existed at one time, but we have no records of such an entertaining tale or anything like it ever happening. Besides, anyone in that situation would need only return through the gate from whence they came.”

“In that case, what stories can you tell me?” I asked, taking out my diptych and eagerly looking up at him.

“We have many tales about the celebrations that were held to welcome the Zent. The country gate would be opened in spring and then closed again at the end of autumn, and the Zent would come each time to perform the process.”

Kirnberger’s lower city still passed down tales of spring from long ago. The season had once marked the beginning of trade for the year, since foreign merchants would pour in when the gates opened, so the residents had needed to prepare themselves. It followed that there were also plenty of stories about merchants hurrying home in the autumn. Those who failed to leave before the Zent closed the gate would need to endure a harsh winter for which they hadn’t prepared. There were plenty of stories sympathizing with and making fun of merchants who had needed to spend all their earnings to survive the cold.

“The visiting merchants would also forget all sorts of belongings in their rush to leave,” the giebe continued.

“Yurgenschmidt has quite a few country gates, doesn’t it?” I asked. “The Zent must have been very busy having to open and close them all each year. I feel

nothing but sympathy for him; I end up bedridden just from circling Ehrenfest.”

The Zent had an astoundingly hard job. Even traveling by highbeast, having to tour the country with a huge retinue of guards and retainers sounded exhausting.

“There’s no need to worry about that,” Giebe Kirnberger cackled. “To my knowledge, there are teleportation circles within each gate. They can be used only by Zents wielding the Grutrissheit.”

Oh, of course.

The Zent had the power to create teleportation circles between duchies—and, since the country gates existed outside of the aubs’ borders, he probably hadn’t even needed their permission to make them.

Oof. Is it just me or is having the Grutrissheit a game changer?

I really hadn’t understood why so many people were up in arms about Trauerqual not having the Grutrissheit; it had seemed to me that the country was doing at least okay under his rule. Now that I was finding out more about the duties expected of the Zent, however, I was starting to understand its importance.

“Still, why was Ehren—no, *Eisenreich’s* country gate closed?” I asked. “It must have been crucial for trade.”

Ahrensbach was maintaining its reasonably high rank almost exclusively because it had the last open country gate in Yurgenschmidt. Such gates were clearly of tremendous importance, so what had happened to warrant this one’s closure?

Giebe Kirnberger pointed at the gate and said, “Those doors once led to a country known as Bosgeiz. During those days, this land was a greater duchy known as Eisenreich, and its territory included most of what is today known as Frenbeltag. The border also reached even farther north than Haldenzel, into an area with a colossal mine which produced the duchy’s exports.”

Eisenreich had sold ore from the mine and products made from the extracted metal to Bosgeiz. It had also used some of the metal to fashion weapons, which the people of Haldenzel had used to defeat feybeasts.

“There is one key factor to note,” the giebe explained. “Any country doing business with Yurgenschmidt wants one export above all else: feystones. They don’t seem to exist elsewhere—or are exceptionally rare, at least—so even the small stones from feybeasts weak enough for commoners to slay can be sold for a considerable profit.”

This was my first time hearing about such countries, and my mind was immediately flooded with questions: How did they use feystones if they didn’t have them otherwise? Did this mean that Ahrensbach was selling feystones to Lanzenave? I noted them down on my diptych as Giebe Kirnberger continued in a quiet voice.

“The duchy’s decline all started when Bosgeiz convinced Aub Eisenreich to overthrow the Zent,” he said. I stared up at him in shock, but he merely stroked his chin for a moment before continuing his tale. “The aub of the time wielded enough power to realize this goal, so he invited the instigators from Bosgeiz to Eisenreich and established a foothold in the Sovereignty. His focus? Securing the Grutrissheit for himself.”

Aub Eisenreich had wanted to depose not a contentious ruler like our current king but a true Zent who had actually carried the Grutrissheit. Bosgeiz had sent Eisenreich tons of provisions and other resources, while the aub had used the teleportation circle to the dormitory to gradually move knights and supplies to the Sovereignty.

“Did nobody warn the aub against taking such extreme action?” I asked.

“Many tried, but he ignored them all. His daughter sensed that he could not be stopped, so she flew to the Sovereignty on her own and, in secret, informed the Zent of the trouble that was brewing. Her news enraged the Zent, who immediately closed the country gate before returning to the Sovereignty and, with the Sovereign Knight’s Order, launching a surprise attack on the Eisenreich Dormitory. The onslaught continued until the aub was dead, and the Eisenreich archducal family was executed for treason, as were all the important Eisenreich nobles who had been moved to the Sovereignty.”

“What happened to the aub’s daughter—the one who informed the Zent?” I asked. “Was she also deemed guilty by association?”

“She alone narrowly escaped execution. In fact, to show his appreciation for her loyalty and her decision to reveal her father’s scheme, the Zent declared her the new Aub Eisenreich.”

That was a huge relief; had she been executed as well, it would have left an awful taste in my mouth. But the Giebe’s tale didn’t end there.

“You must understand, however—that post was no great honor. The greater duchy Eisenreich was divided in two, becoming a middle duchy and giving rise to Frenbeltaag. As for the ore-rich mountains to the north, those were given to Klassenberg. The daughter had also been engaged to a member of the royal family, but that union was swiftly canceled. Instead, she was paired with an archduke candidate more appropriate for a mere middle duchy.”

The daughter’s life had been spared, but she had been made the aub of a torn duchy that had lost its core industries. Her loved ones had all been executed, leaving the duchy without an archducal family to support it, and she had even lost her engagement to a prince. Worst of all, no matter how much Eisenreich had struggled, the Zent had refused to offer even the slightest assistance. Her assignment had come as more of a brutal punishment than anything else.

Giebe Kirnberger continued, “Eisenreich was scorned as a duchy of traitors, and it quickly became a shadow of its former self. Losing ore as an industry also thrust farming into the limelight, so the Leisegangs’ power swelled almost overnight. Of course, there were Eisenreich nobles who were none too pleased about this.”

The archducal family and other key nobles had all been executed, but plenty more Eisenreich nobles had remained. Most had yearned for their former glory and complained ceaselessly about the current state of the duchy.

“And the duchy’s nobles hadn’t been the only ones to complain—the abrupt closing of the country gate had stranded countless visitors from Bosgeiz. Those who had wished to return to their former home gathered in Kirnberger, the province closest to the gate. Minstrels came as well, eager to hear firsthand accounts of such a grand event and spread them through song.”

Songs about the suffering of the Bosgeiz citizens and the foolishness of Aub Eisenreich’s decision had apparently become a tremendous hit all throughout

Yurgenschmidt.

“The descendants of the late Aub Eisenreich formed a new archducal family. They grew up hearing tales of their duchy’s former glory as well as the minstrels’ songs. So, when it came time to choose the next aub, they fell into two camps.”

“Two camps?” I repeated, tilting my head at him.

Giebe Kirnberger offered a grave nod. “One wanted to beg the Zent to reopen the country gate so that the Bosgeiz visitors could return home. The other believed that the visitors should be punished for having corrupted the former aub in the first place.”

The archduke candidates had taken one of two sides, recruiting either those who wished to reclaim the duchy’s former glories or those who thought it wiser to simply ride out their punishment. This had culminated in a war that split the duchy in two.

“The aub bemoaned her lack of power,” the giebe said. “After failing to stop her father from plotting treason, she had then failed to keep her children and grandchildren from ripping the ailing duchy in two. She gave her position and status back to the Zent and requested that someone else be assigned to rule.”

The Zent had come to Eisenreich with the Sovereign Knight’s Order and the first ever Aub Ehrenfest. Together, they had crushed the Eisenreich nobles who wished for the gate to be opened again, then used the Grutrissheit to change the location of the foundation such that Eisenreich would never again seek its former glory. Its name was changed as well.

“It is said that Eisenreich’s castle was once located somewhere in the province we now know as Groschel. With that in mind, perhaps Groschel was indeed a fitting location to house Lady Gabriele when she came from Ahrensbach.”

I wrote everything down, then gave my notes a quick look over. “These events don’t quite add up with what I was taught. As I understood it, the first Aub Ehrenfest attacked Eisenreich and stole the foundation himself.”

“That isn’t entirely incorrect—he *did* come with the Zent and the Sovereign Knight’s Order to take the foundation from the ruling aub. But it certainly does

give a different impression.”

I shut my diptych with a snap and looked up at the giebe. “I happen to know about Eisenreich already. Many of the stories I’ve collected speak of a foolish aub who defied the Zent, but they use the name of a separate duchy that I never associated with Ehrenfest.”

In truth, I had assumed it was no more than an educational tale meant to deter people from committing treason; I never would have imagined that it was actually based on ancient Ehrenfest. I wanted to compare it with the stories told in other duchies.

“Does Kirnberger have any written records of this story?” I asked.

“It has mostly been preserved through oral tradition, with parents telling their children, and giebes telling those who serve them. We have records, but they are rather old, and the antiquated language makes them difficult to read.”

They exist!

I wanted to read these records from where the event had taken place, so I made my appeal without a moment’s hesitation. “Giebe Kirnberger, would you allow me to read them? I’m something of an expert when it comes to ancient language. I also wish to compare the oral accounts, the archducal family’s version of events, and the records that remain with the royal family.”

Giebe Kirnberger took a step back. “E-Erm... Of course. If you wish.” He seemed a bit put off, but I didn’t care about that; he had given me his word that I could delve into the records.

“I thank you ever so much, Giebe Kirnberger. I will need to transcribe them during my short stay here.”

The giebe looked down at me quietly. “And what do you think of the story?”

“Well, it made me realize the true importance of the Grutrissheit. A king without one cannot open country gates, redraw borders, or remake foundations. If an aub attempted to depose our current Zent, he would not be able to respond as forcefully as the Zent from long ago. I can only imagine how much he is struggling to rule Yurgenschmidt.”

It had really hit home for me that a Zent's authority came from the Grutrissheit. Because the current king lacked it, he had no choice but to endure slights against him and couldn't take firm action against greater duchies. Trauerqual sure had it rough.

Giebe Kirnberger must not have expected my answer; he looked taken aback. "It sounds as if you are focusing on King Trauerqual specifically..."

"Is there something wrong with that?" I asked, quizzical.

The giebe sighed, then looked at me intently and said, "Allow me to change the question. What quality would you say is required of Aub Ehrenfest, who must rule a duchy that can no longer use its country gate after an act of treason against the Zent?"

"What *quality*...?" I repeated. This might have been one of those questions that I couldn't afford to get wrong, so I paused to seriously consider my answer. "Could it be the capacity to understand that foreign trade is no longer an option? A skilled aub would surely focus on improving the duchy without it."

Giebe Kirnberger gazed toward not the gate but the sprawling city in the opposite direction. "As he who rules Kirnberger, it is my belief that Aub Ehrenfest is expected to serve the Grutrissheit-wielding Zent without allowing others to influence their position. That is why I remain uneasy about Lord Wilfried taking the role. He is too easily swayed by the Leisegangs, nobles of his own duchy."

Wilfried was working so hard to earn the Leisegangs' support, but his efforts were having the opposite effect on Giebe Kirnberger. That reminded me—one of the giebe's sons served Wilfried as a retainer.

"Did you hear something from your son, by chance?" I asked.

"Nothing that you haven't already been made aware of, I imagine..." The giebe then fell silent and showed no signs of elaborating. He couldn't provide any more details, but his source was already clear to me; I would need to gather the information I required myself.

I'll need to listen to Cornelius's report later.

"Lord Wilfried may have my son in his service, but that doesn't mean he

automatically has my support,” the giebe said, his voice now low and stern.

I straightened my back; this was a discussion about my fiancé, and it was my duty to support him. Before I could speak, however, Giebe Kirnberger continued.

“Tell me, who convinced the aub to marry Giebe Groschel’s daughter after he so foolishly and obstinately refused to take a second wife? Who decided to give up members of her own retinue to support the archducal couple and even retreated to the temple to avoid any unnecessary conflict? Lady Rozemyne, I would ask that *you* become the next aub instead.”

Umm... No?

Sylvester’s decision to take a second wife was entirely the result of Brunhilde’s go-getting attitude, Rihyarda had returned to the aub’s side entirely of her own volition, and Clarissa was only working with Philine under Leberecht because taking her to the temple would have been a political disaster.

“Giebe Kirnberger, I am afraid you are mistaken on several counts,” I said. “The aub came to his own decision to take a second wife, after considering the duchy’s needs and circumstances. In fact, I even tried to stop Brunhilde, knowing that the aub had eyes for only his first wife.”

The giebe received this news with a look of surprise, so I pressed the attack. I explained why Rihyarda and the others were working alongside the archducal couple... but, even then, he didn’t seem convinced.

“So you say, Lady Rozemyne, but the royal family trust you more than they do any other Ehrenfest archduke candid—”

“Giebe Kirnberger,” I said, broadening my smile. I’d started my life in this world as a commoner; I was *not* going to become the next Aub Ehrenfest. “Is it not obvious that my brother, the next aub, would seek to obtain the Leisegangs’ support? Furthermore... were I to accept your request, would I not be allowing another person to influence me, thereby demonstrating my unworthiness to rule? How are you hoping I’ll answer, exactly?”

The giebe’s eyes widened, and after a moment of silence, he laughed. “I now understand your position, Lady Rozemyne. The wind is quite strong here; let us

return to my estate. I will ask for those records to be dug up for you.”

At last, he seemed to have realized that he would never convince me, no matter how much he tried. I produced my highbeast and climbed inside, relieved.

Soon after our return to the giebe’s estate, the records I’d sought were delivered to me. I skimmed the old-looking boards, then Roderick and Hartmut helped me to transcribe them. We needed to work as quickly as we could; we were going to leave Kirnberger once Benno and the scholars finished their meetings and negotiations, and the Gutenbergs set up their new place of work. This process became quicker each year as the scholars working in the printing industry adjusted to their jobs, so we really needed to hurry.

The surviving records weren’t collections of stories but rather simple descriptions of what had occurred each year, focusing in particular on the lives of the former Eisenreich nobles and those who had been unable to return home to Bosgeiz. They seemed to be transcriptions of reports that had previously been given to the Zent.

As expected, these records don’t quite match the oral history.

The events were covered impassively and in chronological order, which made everything seem so much drier than in verbal accounts. The records did, however, elaborate on the role that Bosgeiz had played, which had received almost no mention in my history lessons and the giebe’s retelling.

In the years before Aub Eisenreich’s treason, there had apparently been a massive increase in the number of merchants visiting from other countries, with the same merchants visiting several times from spring to autumn. This had also aligned with an increase in how much food was traded. After the gate was closed, because only the absolute richest of the stranded Bosgeiz merchants had been able to afford citizenship, most had become traveling merchants and scattered to the four winds to earn a living.

That makes sense. Not having citizenship means they wouldn’t have been able to rent homes or stores, find employment, or get married.

How many years had passed since Otto first told me about traveling

merchants? Vague memories of all that he had said to me came to mind. Perhaps he was a descendant of the Bosgeiz stragglers.

In the end, we managed to complete our transcriptions with time to spare. It soon came time for us to leave, so I returned to the temple with Benno, as per usual. I asked him to deliver some of Kirnberger's specialty materials to Heidi in her ink workshop, we discussed the training of those from Groschel, then I saw him off.

"And thus concludes my Spring Prayer," I announced to Zahm and Fran upon returning to my High Bishop's chambers. "I should have a bit more free time now."

"Lady Rozemyne," Zahm replied, "we will soon be accepting the apprentice blue priests, so things are sure to get busier again."

"Oh, but you and Fritz took the lead in directing the gray priests who will soon be their attendants, did you not? I would assume those preparations are already complete."

Zahm nodded with a wryly amused smile. The chefs we had received from Freida and their gray shrine maiden assistants had already begun their training, which meant there was more food in the orphanage. We could also expect new vendors to come by the temple, as ingredients were being bought from stores favored by the home families of the apprentice blue priests.

"Their rooms now contain furniture and study implements," Zahm informed me. "We have arranged their schedules such that they will have as much freedom as possible while adjusting to the ways of the temple. Lady Philine even offered to advise us on what is needed to educate noble children."

During my absence, Philine had taught my temple attendants all sorts of things.

"Well, if the preparations have all been made, I suppose I shall welcome the children," I said. "The temple will get much busier starting tomorrow."

I wanted to be around to keep an eye on things when the apprentice blues moved into the temple, which was why I'd asked for them to stay in the

playroom while I was away for Spring Prayer. I sent an ordonnanz to the castle and asked for the children to be brought over by carriage.

That should take care of them. As for the rest...

“Now then, Cornelius—how is Wilfried doing?” I asked. It was a question that I hadn’t been able to pose in the Giebe’s estate, where anyone might have been listening.

All of my retainers twitched, and the atmosphere in the room suddenly became a lot heavier. Everyone was hiding their true feelings behind a mask of composure, but I started to feel tense.

“Is it as Giebe Kirnberger said...?” I pressed. “Is he being unduly influenced by Leisegang?”

Cornelius gave a slight smile and shook his head to calm me down, then answered in a bright tone, “It seems that, rather than being influenced by them, he is caught between his pride and duties.”

And what does that mean, exactly?

“I’m not sure I follow, but... is there anything I can do?” I asked, my brow furrowed. “Lamprecht *did* ask for our help. I don’t mind assisting them in ways that don’t interfere with my temple duties, but I don’t know what I can actually do.”

Cornelius shrugged. “To put it simply, Lord Wilfried will need to settle these matters himself. It would be best for him if you did not interfere.”

I gave him a searching look, sure that he was hiding something from me. “Is that really true? Did Lamprecht say that?” I then turned to Leonore, who had been with him.

“Wilfried seems to be unsatisfied in various regards,” she added with a smile, “largely as a result of the aub speaking about his Leisegang tasks and taking Lady Brunhilde as a second wife. He has not voiced these concerns to the aub, but he *does* often mumble them to his retainers. To make matters worse—though we expected this from the start—the Leisegang nobles whose provinces he visited for Spring Prayer did not have any kind words for him. They spoke at length about why you should be the next aub.”

The key members of the former Veronica faction had all been punished in some form or another, so it didn't surprise me that the Leisegangs had chosen to demean Wilfried at every opportunity—presumably through obscure noble euphemisms. He was, after all, the only archduke candidate to have been raised by Veronica herself.

"It wouldn't have been easy on my schedule, but perhaps I should have found a way to accompany him on those visits..." I said. "I might have been able to protect him." Maybe I could have managed with enough rejuvenation potions and some carefully timed rests.

Cornelius grimaced and shook his head. "That wouldn't have helped. If Lord Wilfried wants to become the next aub, he needs to follow the Leisegangs himself. Having to rely on you would have wounded his pride and undermined his attempts to improve his reputation. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Perhaps, but the Leisegangs wouldn't have been so openly critical..." I wouldn't have been able to help Wilfried get in their good graces, but I could have at least stopped them from disrespecting him so much.

Cornelius raised an eyebrow at me. "This isn't something for you to worry about, Rozemyne. The temple is in an unfortunate state with so few blue priests, and you already had enough on your plate. Plus, it was Lord Wilfried who offered to circle the provinces for Spring Prayer so that he could meet with the giebes. He could have just traveled around the Central District and then had you accompany him on his visits to the Leisegangs, but he opted against it."

I knew that Cornelius was trying to comfort me and even thought he was making some very reasonable points, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was being too hard on Wilfried.

"In that case," I said, "perhaps I could advise him that he doesn't need to improve his reputation with the Leisegangs right away. The aub may need to piece our shattered duchy back together posthaste, but Wilfried should have plenty of time to gain support before he needs to become the aub." Maybe he would feel more at ease after being told that he didn't need to rush.

Leonore gave me a troubled look. "I agree that he does not require their support right away, but I believe it would be best for you to keep your distance

from him when you can. According to Rihyarda, he is at a complicated age. If you interfere now, it might end badly for everyone.”

I cocked my head at her, not really understanding her concerns. Hartmut stepped in to explain for me.

“Leonore is worried that Wilfried, still wounded by his failure to obtain the Leisegangs’ support, won’t be able to take your advice sincerely. Especially when you are the candidate they want as the next aub.”

Ooh, right... Even my best advice might come across as an insult to him.

If my retainers were being this vocal, I could only assume that Wilfried was losing his mind over his inability to secure the Leisegangs’ support. I wanted him to overcome that misery and get back on his feet, so I made a mental note that I was determined to follow:

Avoid unnecessary contact with Wilfried.

Epilogue

A lone highbeast flew toward Kirnberger. The sky had been bright blue when it departed from Ehrenfest, but now there were dark clouds amassing overhead.

Alexis glared up at the changing heavens, then grabbed a rejuvenation potion from his hip and gulped it down. He wanted to reach Kirnberger before the rain began to fall, so he channeled more mana into the reins he was holding and made his highbeast accelerate.

I wonder, what will Father say when he's heard my piece?

Alexis was both a guard knight serving Wilfried and the son of Giebe Kirnberger's second wife. Tonight, he had an order from his lord to find out what the Giebe thought about Rozemyne after their Spring Prayer meeting—and to secure his cooperation, if possible.

Giebe Kirnberger had openly declared that he wouldn't support an archduke candidate simply because his son was in their service, and Alexis was certain that nothing he could say would change that. The most he could do was pray that Rozemyne had made a poor impression—such news would do wonders to cheer up his lord, who had been in a sour mood for quite some time—but he knew that such a wish was craven and despairing.

Alexis had never thought he would one day return home with such a heavy heart. He wanted to delay his arrival at Kirnberger, even if only a little, but the sky continued to fill with dark clouds. The only choice he had was to accelerate.

"Ah, Lord Alexis. We are glad you made it before the rain got any worse."

Alexis had arrived while the rain was still only a light shower and was immediately welcomed by knights in service to Giebe Kirnberger. These same knights had served as his instructors before he came to work under Wilfried, so he knew them all well. He accepted the towel they held out to him and started

drying his red-orange hair.

“So you’ve finally come of age, Alexis,” one of the knights said. “How quickly time travels. Are you here on a mission?”

“Yep. I wouldn’t have been able to leave the Noble’s Quarter without an order from my lord.”

Underage retainers were normally forbidden from leaving the Noble’s Quarter, even when ordered to. The rule had become slightly more relaxed as of late, but only to accommodate the underage archduke candidates involved with the printing industry and religious ceremonies.

Alexis was a new adult, having graduated only at the end of last winter, and this was his first time returning to Kirnberger after the end of Spring Prayer. Being welcomed home by so many familiar faces made him feel proud that he was finally old enough to complete missions on his own. Before he knew it, the burden of his duty felt a little bit more manageable.

“Lord Alexis, how is Judithe doing? She accompanied Lady Rozemyne on her recent visit but spoke almost entirely about her lady. As I recall, she barely said a word about herself.”

The inquiry had come from a veteran knight who had given Alexis a special training session when he was first chosen to be a guard knight. Alexis knew him well but not his daughter, Judithe, since she hadn’t been able to visit the giebe’s estate before her baptism.

Despite them both being from Kirnberger, Alexis had seen Judithe for the first time in the castle’s playroom. They now shared a profession, working as the guard knights of archduke candidates, but their interactions were still few and far between. On top of being different ages and genders, they served different individuals.

I’m just glad she’s an apprentice knight.

Had she been an apprentice attendant or scholar, they wouldn’t have had *any* opportunities to meet, and Alexis wouldn’t have had anything to say in response to the veteran knight. In their current situation, he could at least see her at the training grounds of the Knight’s Order. Judithe was also famous for

her tremendous accuracy—a skill that had brought her to the attention of Bonifatius, who spoke about her on occasion.

“Lord Wilfried is usually in the castle and Lady Rozemyne in the temple, so their retainers seldom have a chance to interact,” Alexis explained. “I only see Judithe at the training grounds, but she is an excellent knight in the making. She even receives frequent praise from Lord Bonifatius. I greatly admire her accuracy and focus.”

“I see,” the veteran knight replied, pleased to hear that his daughter was doing well. “To think that *Lord Bonifatius* is praising her...”

Alexis was immediately reminded of the days when the veteran knight had declared that his son would follow in his footsteps and grow up to become a knight in service to the giebe. The boy in question was Theodore, who was currently in an unusual situation wherein he served Rozemyne only at the Royal Academy. Alexis smiled to himself, glad to see that the family was as close as ever, then asked after Giebe Kirnberger.

“Is my father in his office? I did send word before leaving Ehrenfest, but...”

“He is. Allow us to take you there.”

“No need. You can get back to training.”

Alexis hadn’t found many opportunities to return home as of late, but he had grown up in the estate; he didn’t need to be led to his father’s office. Still, the attendant and the other knights said that the giebe would scold them if a guest were allowed to wander around without a guide, so he had no choice but to follow them.

“Excuse us, Giebe Kirnberger,” they said.

Giebe Kirnberger often flew around the province on patrol, so his office was usually swarming with visitors whenever he was in the estate. This time, however—perhaps because Alexis had sent word that he was coming—the office was completely empty except for an attendant serving tea, the giebe himself, and a scholar standing behind him.

“Come in,” Giebe Kirnberger said.

Alexis had expected his father to be busy with work, as usual, but this meeting seemed nothing like their ones before. Giebe Kirnberger was acting not as a father welcoming his son home but as a giebe hosting an archducal retainer who had arrived on official business.

The realization that he was being treated first and foremost as a guard knight made Alexis feel the weight of his duty even more keenly than before. He stood up straight as if attempting to shoulder it better.

“Giebe Kirnberger,” Alexis said, “Lord Wilfried has ordered me here to gather intelligence on Lady Rozemyne’s visit during Spring Prayer.”

In response to his son’s formal declaration, Giebe Kirnberger raised an eyebrow, then gave a curt nod and offered the boy a seat. It seemed that Alexis’s attitude had received a passing mark.

“I see,” the giebe replied with a scrutinizing look. “And what intelligence does your lord seek, exactly? Was there some kind of problem with Lady Rozemyne’s Spring Prayer report?”

Alexis stiffened; this was his first time facing Giebe Kirnberger, not his father. Engaging in serious conversations with nobles in the castle had always been the work of scholars and attendants, and those he had interacted with at the Royal Academy had all been underage. In other words, he had very little experience with direct confrontations or needing to weigh up his conversation partner while they did the same with him. He could only swallow nervously under the sharp, experienced eyes of a seasoned noble.

“There was no problem with her report on Spring Prayer,” Alexis said. “Lord Wilfried simply wishes for more information.”

“Hmm. I understand that several of his retainers were relieved of duty over the winter. Is this really an urgent enough matter to warrant sending a guard knight who has recently come of age away from the Noble’s Quarter?”

Venturing off to gather intelligence was the duty of scholars. Of course, a knight who happened to notice something important while on an expedition would report as much to their lord or lady, but it was rare for them to be explicitly tasked with collecting information. Giebe Kirnberger understood all this as well, which was why he had assumed that the circumstances were

serious.

Alexis gave a careful nod. “The impact of the purge has been significant. The archducal family cannot remain as it once was.”

“I received your report that the relationship between the archduke candidates has changed but did not detect any signs of that from Lady Rozemyne during Spring Prayer. She spoke in support of Lord Wilfried becoming the next aub and made it clear that she does not seek the position herself.”

Alexis felt a wave of relief wash away all of the tension in his body. His lord had been making all kinds of accusatory remarks. “The Leisegangs aren’t the only ones pushing for Rozemyne to become the next aub; she’s vying for the position herself,” he had said. “She got Father to adopt her purely so that she could take his place.” Things had gotten so bad that only Rozemyne’s retainers and Lamprecht were trying to refute his claims.

The purge had completely shifted the balance of power, such that barely any nobles of the former Veronica faction remained in the castle. Now, it was dominated by neutral parties and those of the Leisegang faction, meaning that Wilfried was isolated and unpopular despite his supposed position as the next aub. Perhaps this news from Giebe Kirnberger would ease his concerns to some degree.

“As a giebe, how did Lady Rozemyne seem to you?” Alexis asked, then shyly added, “As... As an archduke candidate, that is...”

“Lady Rozemyne, hmm?” the giebe replied, stroking his chin with a smile. “She was even better suited to becoming the aub than I had expected. She has all of the innate qualities necessary for the role; she did not cower when meeting me for the first time, and she clearly stated her thoughts. She also considered the opinions of others without allowing them to sway her. I would expect nothing less from Lord Bonifatius’s granddaughter. She would make for a talented archduchess who would take good advantage of her faction without needing to worry about becoming its puppet.”

Alexis took in a sharp breath; the giebe had seen through him and realized that his son was secretly on edge about facing his father in this formal setting.

“Furthermore,” the giebe continued, “as far as the reports on her actions in

the Royal Academy and the development of the printing industry indicate, Lady Rozemyne is driven by the desire to create a more comfortable future. She wants to raise all of the students' grades, ensure that nobles have more mana at their disposal, change society's views on the temple and religious ceremonies, improve the position of commoners... And she wants more books. Someone with such clear goals will find it easier to secure people who are willing to work for them. As a faraway giebe, I can trust that she won't simply allow her retainers to take control."

That was higher praise than Alexis had expected. Giebe Kirnberger had only met Rozemyne once, though. She may have been an ideal archduke candidate on the outside, but a closer look would surely reveal some faults. Perhaps the giebe's opinion would turn on its head once he knew more of the truth.

"I agree that Lady Rozemyne's grades and ideas are splendid, but she is far too much of a dissident," Alexis said. "Her actions and requests are sudden and incomprehensible to the point that she troubles all those around her. Were she to become the next Aub Ehrenfest, none of us would be able to keep up with her."

This did nothing to faze Giebe Kirnberger; instead, he scoffed. "It is the duty of retainers and spouses to grip the reins of such people—to soften the blows such that their desires can be realized. That is why the archducal family takes the best of the best as retainers, is it not? In fact, we can already see for ourselves that Lady Rozemyne is doing well. Her successful relationships with those in her service are why the entire duchy's grades have risen, not just her own, and why she has managed to connect with top-ranking duchies and the royal family. You will note that the retainers in question are not at all disapproving of their lady—my own Judithe and Theodore are *proud* to be serving her. If you mean to tell me that Lord Wilfried takes issue with this, he must be jealous and nothing more."

Alexis shook his head, his bright blue eyes fixed on the giebe. "Some of her retainers and some of the Leisegangs have taken issue as well. Lord Traugott resigned after saying that he could not keep up with her at all, and the Leisegangs supporting her are pushing for the Ehrenfest students to lower their grades at the Royal Academy. It is hard to imagine her being a successful aub."

“You would use *Traugott* as an example? As I recall, Lord Bonifatius was enraged at his grandson and fully blamed him for the incident. I was also informed via reports that the Leisegangs would support *higher* grades under Lady Rozemyne’s rule. Now... whose words were those? Not yours, I expect?”

Alexis faltered. His father was situated in Kirnberger, a backwater province, yet he seemed to know quite a bit about Ehrenfest’s current state of affairs. Minor nitpicks would do nothing to sway him.



After a moment spent in silence, Alexis gave a bitter nod, though he found his father's tenacity to be somewhat assuring. "They were the words of my lord's former head attendant, Oswald. He would describe Lord Wilfried as a far superior archduke candidate—one who does not trouble others with unconventional demands."

"Moronic," the Giebe said. "That may be convenient for retainers, but it will do nothing to benefit the duchy."

To his own surprise, Alexis was overcome with the feeling that he had just confirmed an important suspicion: there was a massive gap between what his fellow retainers and everybody else understood as common sense. Their position was heavily biased in favor of the former Veronica faction, and the current political climate had only made them more obstinate. It was constricting—and, at times, suffocating.

"An aub needs the will to decide upon and advance toward a goal, and the resolve to make hard decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences," Giebe Kirnberger declared. "As an honor student, Lord Wilfried would make for a safe archduke, but someone who is a slave to his retainers' opinions would never be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with top-ranking duchies or execute revolutionary ideas. In that sense, I consider Lady Rozemyne better suited to becoming an archduchess than a first wife."

Alexis sighed. "Then I suppose I cannot give Lord Wilfried the answer he seeks. Father, if my lord holds me responsible for your assessment, will you welcome me home in Kirnberger?"

"I can't say I follow. *You* would be held responsible for *my* opinions?"

"I would assume so. Lamprecht was rebuked after meetings with the Leisegang faction ended poorly."

Wilfried had resolved to use Spring Prayer to get the nobles of the Leisegang faction on his side. He had assumed that his engagement to Rozemyne would make them more likely to accept him, citing the fact that, during his trips for the printing industry and such, he had actually been respected as the next aub. Rozemyne's retainers and Lamprecht had attempted to advise Wilfried against the idea, stressing that it would end in failure, but he had chosen to go through

with it anyway. He had sincerely believed that he could get through to the Leisegangs once they were standing face-to-face.

Alexis hadn't been among those trying to stop his lord; he had appreciated the enthusiasm, if anything. He would simply focus on his duty as a guard—besides, Wilfried wouldn't expect things to go well right off the bat.

Or so he had thought.

The giebes among the Leisegang faction had all given Wilfried cold glares and rejected him so harshly that he had come away distraught. Their support was for Rozemyne alone, and they had made it perfectly clear that, even with his engagement, they would eliminate Wilfried without a second thought if doing so would make their preferred candidate the next aub.

In his anger, Wilfried had been quick to pass the buck. "This plan failed because Lamprecht didn't lay the proper groundwork. Rozemyne's to blame as well; she's always so uncooperative, even though she's my fiancée."

Giebe Kirnberger shook his head. "It should have come as no surprise to Lord Wilfried that the current Leisegang nobles would reject him. If he truly believed that he would win them over so easily, then he is tragically optimistic. Does he have zero understanding of what his grandmother did to them?"

"He knows the facts, but he has yet to grasp how much the Leisegangs hate her or how much resentment has accumulated over the years," Alexis replied. "I am aware of the grave injustices that Lady Veronica inflicted upon Mother, but as I never experienced them firsthand, I never think about them too deeply."

Alexis's mother was a Leisegang noble. In her keenness to escape Veronica's abuse, she had consulted Bonifatius's first wife directly and, with Bonifatius's support, married into Kirnberger. Veronica's methods had put his mother at her wit's end, but she had resolved not to waste any time dwelling on those she disliked once she was free of them.

All that Alexis knew about his mother's past were things he had pieced together from the warnings he had received prior to visiting the castle for the first time for his debut. One that he still clearly remembered was his mother telling him not to get close to her during their visit, as it would only bring him harm. He had been introduced as Giebe Kirnberger's son and spent his time in

the castle with his father and his father's first wife rather than with his mother; thus, his connection to the Leisegangs had appeared to be nonexistent. Now that Alexis was older, he could see just how far his parents and his father's first wife had gone to keep Veronica from noticing him—to keep him safe.

It had been wise of Alexis's parents to act with such caution. At the time, Veronica had considered it far more important to eliminate key figures within the Leisegang faction than to target the son of a neutral giebe. As a result, Alexis had spoken to her once when first greeting her and then never again. Even when it had come time to seek out potential retainers for her beloved grandson, she had seen him only as the son of the ever-stubborn Giebe Kirnberger.

In short, Alexis had very little experience with Veronica. He had seen her as someone who was by some means more powerful than Lord Sylvester, the aub himself, but his opinion of her had run no deeper than that. As a result, he had thought almost nothing about her later deposition. He hadn't been able to empathize with either the Leisegang or the Veronica faction, so he hadn't found it strange that Wilfried was so unattached to his grandmother's past deeds.

"I won't deny that Lord Wilfried is dispassionate about past events that didn't involve him," Alexis said. "He is also optimistic to a fault. However, he truly was an exemplary lord before he returned from the Royal Academy and witnessed the impact of the purge."

"What changed, exactly?"

"Above all else, he began to view Lady Rozemyne as an enemy, and in the strangest of ways. He also suddenly began demanding that the other archduke candidates support him when necessary and give him the credit for their accomplishments, since he is the next aub."

Alexis knew that Oswald had spent years laying the groundwork for his lord to take the archducal seat, but Wilfried had never before tried to steal the other candidates' achievements; on the contrary, he had been actively against it. He had said as much to Rozemyne during the Royal Academy's award ceremony... yet now he was arguing that it was only common sense for one's fiancée and younger siblings to surrender their accomplishments.

“Lord Wilfried confidently declares that such is the way of greater duchies, and that Ehrenfest has followed this practice since long ago,” Alexis said. “Still, I cannot say it feels right to me...”

“The way of greater duchies, hm?” Giebe Kirnberger mused. “It certainly is the case that, when half-siblings are competing for the position of aub, full siblings trade credit among one another. However, through his engagement, Lord Wilfried has already secured his position as the next archduke; there is no need for him to steal the achievements of others.” He then paused, a distant look in his eye, and let out a heavy sigh. “It is widely known that Lady Veronica gave Lord Sylvester the credit for his retainers’ work. So, one *could* say that Ehrenfest’s archducal family has been using such methods for quite some time...”

Alexis was struck with the urge to put his head in his hands and groan. In a sense, Wilfried had been right; the problem was that his “long ago” referred specifically to the height of Veronica’s power. Such horrible behavior, which was common among retainers of the former Veronica faction, was precisely the reason why so many thought Wilfried was carrying on Veronica’s legacy. At this rate, the Leisegang nobles would only think less and less of him.

“Could I have prevented this by taking more interest in Lady Veronica’s actions?” Alexis asked, searching for personal culpability.

“You would have struggled to challenge Lord Wilfried alone,” the Giebe replied. “That said... his change is all too sudden. Do you have any idea what might have inspired it? Even the archduke lost retainers; Lord Wilfried was surely no exception.”

Alexis immediately understood his assignment: identify the source of the change and eliminate it. He fell into thought; so much had happened that might have been responsible.

“In his day-to-day life, the biggest change has been that his head attendant, Oswald, was removed from service—though it was presented as his resignation.”

He had said to his fellow retainers, “I am being relieved of duty for fear that my faction may cause problems. The aub has ordered that I present it as my

willing resignation so that our lord does not grow to resent his father.” Then, shortly after, he had begged Wilfried for permission to resign, saying with tears in his eyes, “My service is no longer what’s best for you.” His family had been told to stand down for similar reasons, so Wilfried had lost four adult retainers in total.

“Lord Wilfried cursed himself for being too weak to save his longest-serving and most loyal vassal,” Alexis continued. “It seems to me that it was because his fiancée didn’t share his frustration and pain during the feast celebrating spring that he lost his temper.”

Sometime after, Alexis had seen Wilfried being consoled by his name-sworn retainer Barthold. “The princess of Leisegang is surely celebrating that Oswald has finally been torn away from you,” Barthold had said. “She is of a faction that loathes Lady Veronica, after all.”

Alexis went on, “I would assume that his emotional instability has come from losing the man who was serving him even before his baptism. Lord Wilfried was raised by Lady Veronica, so he was much, much closer to Oswald than to the archducal couple.”

“Hmm...” Giebe Kirnberger pondered. “There is a chance that, without his head attendant to scold or comfort him, the selfishness mounting within Lord Wilfried is finally leaking out. Could this be an unconscious protest, demanding that the aub return his retainers to him?”

Alexis crossed his arms. He knew that the sudden change in his lord was troublesome, but he had never considered the situation from his father’s perspective. Seeking the advice of a third party was always important.

Wanting to make the most of such a rare opportunity to get his father’s advice, Alexis put forward a few other theories. “I think the change in his work environment has been significant as well. Neutral and Leisegang nobles are now the most prominent figures in the castle. Thus, Lord Wilfried is no longer surrounded by nobles of the former Veronica faction.”

“In other words, he’s no longer surrounded by those who will praise his every move,” the Giebe said.

Alexis nodded, though he was taken aback by his father’s harsh tone.

“Overall, his retainers are of the opinion that positive reinforcement is the most productive approach, but Lord Bonifatius now barks at him almost nonstop.”

“Lord Bonifatius?”

“Yes. The work that Lord Ferdinand did in the temple has been given to Lady Rozemyne, while his duties in the castle have been given to Lord Bonifatius and Lord Wilfried.”

Wilfried had found himself with dramatically more work and dramatically less free time. He also needed to meet with Bonifatius whenever it was time to carry out his new duties, and it seemed that the big ol’ granddad overflowing with love for his granddaughter was suffocating him.

Alexis understood why his lord was so frustrated, but he couldn’t wrap his head around the complaints that Wilfried so often made: “I wish Rozemyne would do this work instead”; “Rozemyne sure has it easy; she gets to relax in the temple”; and “Rozemyne’s going to be the next first wife, yet she doesn’t take her duties seriously.” Wilfried always voiced these gripes with such confidence, but Ferdinand had rarely spent much time in the castle—anyone could guess that his temple work was the greater burden. On top of that, Rozemyne only had one adult scholar: Hartmut. Even including her apprentice scholars, when it came to desk work, she was absolutely starved of manpower.

“Lord Wilfried has three adult scholars and three apprentice scholars,” Alexis continued. “If working with Lord Bonifatius is causing him so much trouble, could he not just order them to take over for him?”

“Did you make that suggestion?”

“The scholars refused. They said they couldn’t possibly do such work without the necessary experience, especially as they would need to take the blame for any errors they might make.”

Just as Melchior’s retainers needed to undergo training before they could start performing their duties in the temple, Wilfried and his retainers would need to be trained for their handover. The problem was that Ehrenfest’s archducal family was small, and the archducal couple couldn’t spend their time educating their son when they were so short-staffed themselves. Bonifatius had been the only person they could ask to give Wilfried archducal lessons.

Giebe Kirnberger shook his head. “If your lord desires better working conditions, then his only option is to speed along his handover training. Has anything else changed?”

Alexis paused, trying to remember what else Wilfried had complained about, then clapped his hands together in realization. “He seems to be intensely unhappy about the aub taking a second wife.”

“Really? I thought it was a *welcome* move by Aub Ehrenfest, considering how long he spent stubbornly refusing the idea. What in the world does Lord Wilfried take issue with?”

Wilfried hadn’t said anything in the dining hall, where he had first learned about the engagement, but he had grumbled nonstop upon returning to his chambers. “Rozemyne’s already a Leisegang bride,” he had said. “I would have rather seen Father take *her* as a second wife than Brunhilde. This is Rozemyne’s fault; she’s the princess of the Leisegangs but can’t even keep them under control.”

Alexis’s heart sank as he remembered what had happened next—Wilfried had asked Charlotte to help him convince the aub to rethink his decision, then asked Brunhilde to cancel the engagement. They had both refused, of course, and Alexis had struggled to console his lord after the fact. Wilfried had been on the verge of a panic attack.

“I think he was so displeased because Lady Brunhilde is more or less his age,” Alexis said, “and her engagement to the aub means that one of Lady Rozemyne’s retainers is joining the archducal family.”

“Still, taking a second wife to gain control over a faction and assist with the delegation of desk work is the *duty* of an aub. The day shall come when Lord Wilfried will need to take one himself.” Ehrenfest’s archducal family was already unusually small; it was hard to imagine the next archduke going without a second wife as well.

“Correct,” Alexis replied. “I personally agree with Aub Ehrenfest’s decision to marry a Leisegang, but the idea is unpopular among my fellow retainers. Many of them oppose the thought of giving the Leisegangs more power and putting Lady Rozemyne one step closer to becoming the next aub.”

All of a sudden, Alexis realized something—out of everyone in Ehrenfest, Wilfried and his retainers were the only ones opposed to Sylvester taking Brunhilde as his second wife. Most of the former Veronica faction had already been detained and punished, so every single giebe understood and approved of the archduke's decision to take a Leisegang bride to gain more control over the duchy's dominant faction.

"Perhaps his distaste for second wives is another lingering consequence of being educated by Lady Veronica," the giebe mused. "That woman refused to allow her husband to take one and came to Lord Sylvester's defense whenever he refused to remarry."

"If what you say is true, then it will be almost impossible for Lord Wilfried to escape Lady Veronica's shadow. His recent change in attitude has led to him being identified as a devout member of the former Veronica faction. In fact..." Alexis fell silent, cast his eyes down, and then muttered, "Now, he views even Lamprecht as an enemy, simply because the latter is Lady Rozemyne's elder brother."

Lamprecht had tried to warn Wilfried that circling the Leisegang-ruled provinces for Spring Prayer was a bad idea, and the other retainers had doubted his loyalty ever since. Alexis had at one point tried to stand up for his colleague, only for Barthold to ask, "Does this mean that Kirnberger stands with Lady Rozemyne, then?" Lamprecht had even told Alexis not to bother. "I'm used to this," he had said. "Worry about yourself, else you'll end up in the same situation."

From that point on, Alexis had tried not to interfere—and things had gone exactly as he'd expected. Wilfried's attempt to bond with the giebes had ended in failure, forcing him to return to the castle with his tail between his legs. Of course, he had immediately tried to blame Lamprecht.

"My lord," Lamprecht had responded, "your failure was the result of your own refusal to heed our warnings and your underestimation of the Leisengangs' pent-up frustrations. You would never have been able to undo years of suffering through one Spring Prayer. This is something that must be worked through gradually."

Alexis had considered that a reasonable explanation; Wilfried would simply need to reflect on his actions and try to do better next time. However, everyone else had dismissed Lamprecht as being cold and stonyhearted.

“I was right not to speak my thoughts,” Alexis concluded.

“Well, what had you wanted to say?”

“There’s no use pouting about it now. Lamprecht and Lady Rozemyne’s retainers warned you what would happen, but you charged ahead anyway.”

“Hmm... An outburst like that would absolutely lead to Kirnberger being treated as an enemy. Continue to keep your mouth shut.”

After grouching even more about Lamprecht’s evaluation, Wilfried had gone straight to his name-sworn retainer Barthold, who had consoled him and stressed that he wasn’t to blame. “It really is a shame that nobody ever appreciates your hard work...” he had said. “If only Lady Rozemyne and Lamprecht had done their jobs properly and laid the groundwork for your visits, this never would have happened.”

That had cheered up Wilfried *and* encouraged the other retainers to agree. Soon enough, they had all thrust the blame upon Lamprecht. It was all so ridiculous that Alexis had started to wonder whether it was some kind of surreal comedy act. Lamprecht was in a far more pitiable situation than Wilfried, since he was being blamed for something that wasn’t at all his fault.

“Did your lord say nothing to you, even knowing that you have a Leisegang mother?” the giebe asked.

“It seems that, like Lady Veronica, Lord Wilfried views me only as the son of Giebe Kirnberger. He seems to count me among our province’s nobles who flatly declare themselves to be neutral and cast aside any and all involvement in faction politics.”

It was true that Alexis wanted to guard his lord above all else; unnecessary thoughts about faction politics would serve only as a distraction. At the same time, however, he had only been able to secure his current position because of an invitation from Lamprecht. His fellow retainer had said that, following Veronica’s deposition, Wilfried needed more neutral and Leisegang nobles in

his service. Alexis had gone along with it.

These events were why Alexis was none too pleased about Lamprecht receiving so much undeserved ire, but Lamprecht had said that it would only be temporary. The archducal family would soon finish reorganizing their retainers, he had declared, and the punished nobles of the former Veronica faction would return to work. Then, Lord Wilfried and the Leisengangs would finally calm down.

“Despite it all, Lord Wilfried *has* been working hard...” Alexis said. Even after the Ivory Tower incident, his lord had tried to restore his lost honor instead of simply conceding and wallowing in his misery.

Wilfried was in an unfathomably difficult position; he was in the same grade as Rozemyne, meaning he was constantly being compared to her, but he had still secured high enough grades to be recognized as an honor student. He had also been doing an excellent job of uniting the dormitory and was—at least until recently—on good terms with his younger siblings. Even while being reproached by the students whose families had been purged, he had carried out his duties as an archduke candidate and taken Dunkelfelger’s dinner challenges in his stride, even leading the knights to victory.

“That is precisely why seeing my lord degrade himself makes me so frustrated and miserable,” Alexis continued. “I cannot bear it. I *loathe* it, even. Where is the boy who did everything in his power to protect Lady Rozemyne? I fought by his side during our match against Dunkelfelger and could hardly express the pride I felt after our victory. From the bottom of my heart, I was glad to be a guard knight, to have taken on the challenge, and to have won...”

Back then, Alexis had sincerely believed that everything would be okay, no matter how bad the purge turned out to be. He had blindly assumed that Ehrenfest was unifying around Wilfried and that his lord would guide everyone into a bright future. By this point, however, clinging to such a dream was foolish.

“Father, I now understand why you always described factions as troublesome business. I neither know nor understand what has driven Lord Wilfried to single-handedly revive Lady Veronica’s cursed legacy, but the atmosphere in the castle is suffocating. I wish for nothing more than to resign and return to Kirnberger.”

The giebe sighed, then crossed his arms and tightly knit his brow. It was the same pose he always made before giving out new tasks, so Alexis straightened up on instinct.

“This is as simple as you wishing to abandon your duties as a retainer simply because your lord no longer suits your preference,” Giebe Kirnberger said in a low voice. “In that regard, you are no different from Lord Wilfried, throwing a tantrum because things have not gone as you hoped.”

Alexis inhaled sharply. He wanted to protest but couldn’t think of a reasonable comeback.

“Think of the head attendant who was dismissed,” his father went on. “Was he really trying to make his lord more considerate, or does he secretly continue to whisper poison in his ear, hoping to rot him from the inside out? You mentioned that one of Lord Wilfried’s scholars gave his name to avoid punishment—have you questioned whether this boy can be trusted?”

“What? A name-sworn can’t defy their lord, can they?”

The life of a name-sworn retainer was quite literally in the hands of whomever they served. Alexis had not even thought to doubt Barthold.

“Those children were forced to give their names; the only alternative was death. They acted out of not loyalty but self-preservation. Lady Veronica forced many to give their names to her, but there were some among them who weren’t completely faithful to her. They might not be able to disobey orders, but none can say what they are thinking on the inside. Keep that danger in mind and close to heart.”

Once again, Alexis thought about Barthold, who always seemed to be currying favor with his lord. Now that Giebe Kirnberger mentioned it, the name-swearing *had* made Wilfried especially trusting of the scholar; Barthold had been given many more important roles than a new retainer would normally deserve.

“Focus on Lord Wilfried’s work environment,” Giebe Kirnberger said. “If paperwork meant only to *support* the aub is too much for him, then he surely won’t be able to function when the day comes that he is the aub proper. Unless... Could someone be tampering with his work? Ensure that no Leisegang nobles are causing trouble behind the scenes.”

It generally fell to scholars to help their lord or lady with paperwork, but the giebe maintained that knights were meant to have eyes *everywhere*. Alexis reflected on his own naivety. Standing in the room and searching for signs of a potential attack weren't enough; he needed to keep an eye on the paperwork itself.

"That said," Giebe Kirnberger continued, "you must also reflect on your own words and deeds, to ensure that you aren't provoking the Leisegangs. Have you ever given them the impression that you've forgotten the cruelties Lady Veronica inflicted upon their faction?"

Alexis considered that to be very likely. He didn't know much about them to begin with, but he also hadn't made an effort to learn.

"Open your eyes and observe all that your lord does," the giebe said, his tone chastising. "Open your ears to the voices of all who speak to him. Pay close attention to Lord Wilfried, whom you must protect as his knight. If you see him stray from his path, drag him back onto it. That is your job as a retainer. I do not want you to return here a coward who would rather run away from the unpleasant than face it head-on."

Again, Alexis swallowed hard. "But what if my absolute best still isn't enough?"

"That's simple: gather enough evidence to prove that your lord is a failed archduke candidate, then petition the aub to disinherit him and relieve his retainers of duty. If you return under those circumstances, I will welcome you with open arms. Take responsibility for your work."

It would be easy for Alexis to resign, whereas proving that Wilfried was an incompetent lord would be anything but. He would need to observe him carefully and investigate his surroundings closely.

After speaking with his father, Alexis had realized that he hadn't been trying hard enough as a retainer. People would surely label him a failure of a guard knight before they even considered branding Wilfried a failed archduke candidate.

"I apologize for my shameful remarks," Alexis said to the giebe. "From this day forth, I will put my absolute all into serving Lord Wilfried." In truth, he was

frustrated to have been scolded and accused of working in half measures, but he now saw a future he could advance toward.

Alexis had arrived at Kirnberger feeling suffocated, but now he knew what needed to be done. First, he would carefully investigate Wilfried's surroundings. Then, he would work with Lamprecht to figure out what had caused their lord to change so drastically. His lips curled into a competitive smile; he now had something that he needed to do.

Reflection and Envy

The news that Father would be taking Brunhilde as his second wife had made the blood drain from my face. A fake smile and superficial congratulations were enough to get me through the rest of our meal, but my calm quickly fell apart once I was back in my chambers.

“Vanessa, what should we do?” I asked my head attendant. “At this rate, Father is going to take Brunhilde as a second wife—and it will be all my fault.”

During our family meeting, my frustrations had finally become too much to bear. I had exploded at my parents and criticized my father for not taking a second wife to ease the growing fears of the nobility. My outburst was surely the reason he had now rushed into this engagement with Brunhilde, a member of the Leisegang faction who had yet to take a fiancé and was young enough not to impact Mother’s pregnancy or delivery.

“Lady Charlotte, do calm down,” Vanessa replied. “Regardless of whether your criticisms played a role in this, it was ultimately the aub’s decision to take a second wife. Furthermore, there is no mistaking that he needs to marry a Leisegang to put the other nobles back in order. I see no reason for your unease when, after years of skirting the issue, your father has finally listened to you.”

She was right; I certainly had said that my father needed to take a Leisegang as his second wife. As a result, one of my sister’s precious retainers was now in a terribly difficult position.

This new engagement would do plenty to benefit the archducal family, but Brunhilde had very little to gain from it. She would be welcomed as a second wife to put the Leisengangs in order, but she was still underage; I struggled to see how she would manage to control the older members of her family. It was equivalent to someone ordering me to make Lord Bonifatius and my uncle agree with one another, despite my being so much younger than them both. The very thought made me dizzy.

To make matters worse, although everyone had agreed that bringing

Brunhilde into the family fold would make the Groschel reconstruction a lot easier to manage, nobody had acknowledged that my parents had disrupted the schedule to begin with. No matter how one dressed it, Brunhilde was being made to marry Father to remedy the consequences of my mother's pregnancy.

As I understood it, Brunhilde had accepted such active roles in the printing industry and reconstruction effort because she was due to become the next Giebe Groschel. No matter how much her new engagement benefited the province, she was surely devastated to be losing her position simply to satisfy Father's sudden demands. I recalled my own heartache after losing my chance to become the next aub because of my brother's engagement.

Father has a tendency not to realize how people feel on the inside. He likely has no idea how much I detest his prioritizing Wilfried over me...

Because it was already decided that Wilfried would become the next Aub Ehrenfest, Brunhilde would never even have a chance to mother the duchy's next ruler—a great honor in itself. The future that most second wives would wish for and strive toward would be closed off to her from the outset.

On top of everything else, Father was completely devoted to Mother and had spent so very long declaring that he neither wanted nor needed a second wife; not even someone as young and attractive as Brunhilde was likely to win his affections. Perhaps this was uncouth for me to say about my own father, but his love had always bordered on the obsessive.

Brunhilde was a dazzling star of the Royal Academy with plenty of admirers, not only from other duchies but from the Sovereignty as well. Yet here she was, resigning herself to a loveless marriage—and to a man old enough to be her father. The mere thought of ending up in such a position myself sent a shiver down my spine.

"Rather than taking Brunhilde, Father should have found an older widow unable to bear a child," I concluded.

Vanessa shook her head at me. "You may not approve of this engagement, Lady Charlotte, but there is nothing that you can do to prevent it; Giebe Groschel has already expressed his approval. If you feel that you have wronged Brunhilde, then think of ways to improve her future. Help her in ways she will

sincerely appreciate.”

The feast celebrating spring ended in a commotion after Father’s engagement to Brunhilde was announced. The nobles then started returning to their respective provinces, and the castle became a little bit quieter. In the meantime, I summoned Brunhilde to my room; she was visiting the castle to examine the western building.

“I realize that these are busy times, so please forgive this inconvenience,” I said.

“Oh, no. I was overjoyed to receive your invitation,” Brunhilde replied and sat down with a smile. “I, too, have much to discuss with you.”

I got my attendant to pour us some tea, and my eyes wandered to the necklace adorning Brunhilde’s breast. It contained the engagement feystone that Father had given her—and, as long as she wore it, she was in an equivalent position to the rest of the archducal family.

“First of all, allow me to apologize,” I said. “It is likely my fault that you were asked to become the second wife to begin with. I never thought my outburst would cause you to shoulder such an immense burden. My actions were unforgivably shallow.”

“There is nothing for you to worry about, Lady Charlotte. The aub made this decision himself.”

I shook my head, conscious that she was only being considerate. “If my father desired a Leisegang woman who would not affect Mother’s pregnancy, he could have chosen an older widow with more socializing experience. At the very least, she would have found it easier to make your family comply...”

That much was a given; I wouldn’t be able to face off against Uncle or Lord Bonifatius, but I would easily be able to deal with Wilfried, Melchior, or their future children. Not to mention, nobody would bat an eye about a widow older than Mother not receiving Father’s love or favor.

“Lady Charlotte... do you expect my socializing to be inadequate?” Brunhilde asked.

“Not in the least. We have arranged tea parties together in the Royal Academy. I am well aware of your talents.”

Brunhilde’s assistance had allowed me to smoothly interact with top-ranking duchies when I was still only a first-year. Ehrenfest had socialized only as a bottom-ranking duchy before then, but she had advised me on how to act and guided me through the unknown. I could no longer count how many times Rozemyne’s retainers had saved me, be it through their experience attending tea parties with top-ranking duchies or their knack for providing tea and sweets to the tastes of our guests.

“Bringing the Leisegangs under one banner will save Ehrenfest and do much to assist Father and me,” I said. “However, I cannot see what *you* gain from it. Uniting an entire faction is an overwhelming task for an adult, much less a mere student.”

After sipping her tea, Brunhilde gave me a troubled smile. “Though I appreciate your concern for me, Lady Charlotte, an aged widow simply would not do. Plus, there is no need to unify the Leisegangs.”

I was stunned, unable to respond with anything more than a quizzical stare. We *didn’t* need to unify the Leisegangs? I wanted to ask what she meant, but she continued unprompted.

“Lady Veronica’s reign of tyranny over the Leisegangs lasted much too long. The elders among them—those who endured her abuse the longest—are too angry and resentful to even consider agreeing with the archducal family. To be frank with you, if we *did* allow the Leisegangs to unite under a second wife, it would inspire them to take drastic action—to eliminate as much of the current archducal family as would be necessary to position Lady Rozemyne as the next aub with Lord Bonifatius as her support base. The situation could get much worse than it is already.”

Her warning shook me to my core. “Would the Leisegangs target Mother and me as well...? We also suffered Grandmother’s abuse.”

“The two of you would potentially escape their wrath, but not Lord Melchior. Because he is male, they would consider him a threat.”

Perhaps it was because Mother and I had been victims ourselves, or because

we had so many Leisegangs in our service, but I was shocked to hear that Melchior and I would also be scorned. As it turned out, the Leisegangs hated the archducal family as a whole, irrespective of our individual relationships with Veronica.

“Right now,” she continued, “Ehrenfest needs a second wife from the younger generation—someone who considers Lady Veronica’s reign a thing of the past, who understands that Lady Rozemyne doesn’t want to be the next aub, and who can work with the archducal family to move our duchy forward instead of merely serving as a figurehead so that her family can sow dissent.”

I couldn’t help but sigh in awe. Brunhilde understood the danger of the Leisegangs so much better than I did as a member of the archducal family.

“My engagement was announced, and it subsequently became known that I am taking a more active role in the reconstruction of Groschel,” Brunhilde said. “As a result, the internal power balance has split between those who desire Lady Rozemyne as the next aub and those who wish to maintain the status quo now that the archduke is more pliable to our desires. My intention is not to unify the Leisegangs under one banner. Quite the opposite. I want to keep them apart so that they don’t pose a threat to the archducal family.”

Brunhilde was carefully observing her house and considering her every move... but I could not understand why she was so devoted to the archducal family.

“You were meant to become the next Giebe Groschel and, with any luck, take a groom of your own,” I said. “Surely becoming my father’s second wife is not what you truly desire.”

One of my guard knights, Lengurt, was a Groschel native, so I considered myself quite knowledgeable about the province. Brunhilde was the daughter of the giebe’s first wife and was being raised as his successor, since he had no male heirs to speak of. The kind of education needed to rule was not the same one needed to be married into another house. As someone who had gone from being a potential archduchess to merely the future wife of a foreign noble, I was well aware of the troubles that came with a sudden change of position.

On top of everything else, Giebe Groschel surely hadn’t accounted for his

daughter being taken by the aub. The province was bound to struggle without its successor, I thought... but Brunhilde gave a faint smile and shook her head.

“There is no need for you to be so troubled, Lady Charlotte. The truth is... this engagement is my only hope.”

I simply blinked at her, not having expected that at all.

Brunhilde’s expression turned contemplative, then she gave me a sound-blocking magic tool. Her bright, noble smile never so much as faltered as she said, “You must keep this a secret from everyone, even Lengurt. My father’s second wife has given birth to a son.”

I took a sharp breath. In other words, Brunhilde was losing her chance to become the next Giebe Groschel irrespective of this engagement. I was no stranger to the heartache of one’s hard work suddenly coming to naught, simply because of an unfair disparity between the genders. Back then, nothing had worked to console me, so I could only stare at Brunhilde as I racked my brain for a response.

“Erm... I do not know what to say...” was my eventual reply. “At the very least, I can understand how you feel. There have been times when I wished that I were born a man.”

“Ah, yes... You were in an unfortunate position yourself. I relate to your feelings of powerlessness all too well.”

We gave each other wooden smiles. Though we had only exchanged a few words, our similar plights had given us something to bond over.

“Father rejoiced at the birth of his son, then *coincidentally* decided to postpone the announcement of his successor,” Brunhilde explained. “My replacement has not yet been made official, but neither can I take a husband in Groschel—doing so would give rise to all sorts of conflict. On that path, my only option is to wait for the future, when either my little sister takes a groom or the boy starts to grow up. In either case, I will not be the giebe. Oh, what a fit Mother threw.”

Were the son to become the next Giebe Groschel, his mother, the second wife, would take precedence over the first. Brunhilde’s mother would become

more and more neglected after her daughters were married off.

Ah, that reminds me—one of the reasons Father put Wilfried with Rozemyne was to protect Mother's position.

I sighed. The moment Brunhilde was ousted from her position as the next Giebe Groschel, she would need to start worrying about her mother's future. She wouldn't even have a chance to grieve her own loss.

"Of course," Brunhilde continued, "Mother rejoiced when I told her about my engagement to Aub Ehrenfest. The mother of the archduke's second wife would never be neglected, would she?"

Becoming the archduke's second wife was normally cause for concern. How would one's status change when the position of aub passed to the next generation? Brunhilde, however, was a retainer serving my sister, our duchy's future first wife; barring any extraordinary circumstances, she would continue to thrive even after the generational shift.

"Thus, I rather welcome this engagement," Brunhilde remarked. "You must consider my situation from every angle. Would you not agree that such an influential position—one that will give me power over future giebes—is something to be excited about? I will stand above even my father, whose whims I have for so long been a slave to."

Her amber eyes narrowed into a mischievous squint, and an impish smile spread across her lips. Like me, she was losing the future she had spent her entire life working toward, but she showed not a trace of despair. How were we so different? Compared to me, she was like a dazzling light, refusing to let the present drag her down as she marched ever onward.

"More than Groschel," she continued, "I worry about how you and Lady Florencia feel. Is my sudden rise to second wife not displeasing to either of you?"

"Oh, no. How could we ever be displeased about this engagement? You are giving us such crucial assistance during these formidable times. Only a true fool would speak ill of your decision." No sooner had the words passed my lips than I clapped a hand over my mouth in realization; there was *one* member of the archducal family who had been protesting Brunhilde's new position. "Could it

be that... Wilfried said something to you?”

Brunhilde’s smile widened ever so slightly—a silent yes.

Wilfried had told me that he was going to protest to Father, but it had never even crossed my mind that he might complain to Brunhilde. The engagement was a decision to be made between parents; no matter what he said to her, she was unable to end it herself.

“My brother, the next archduke, would complain to you about an engagement decided *by the aub*, for the sake of the duchy...?” I muttered. “Unbelievable. I cannot express how sorry I am. Perhaps because of the education they received from Grandmother, neither my father nor Wilfried views second wives in a positive light.”

Wilfried was so opposed to the idea that he had even tried to make us come together as siblings to protest the engagement. He had gotten very emotional, saying things like “No good can come from taking a second wife,” “Aren’t you worried about Mother? That’s cold...” and “Rozemyne can take care of unifying the Leisegangs.” It concerned me that he prioritized his emotions over political decision-making.

And it was fairly exasperating when he told me that our sharing a mother obligates me to obey him...

The purge had greatly reduced the size of the former Veronica faction, and now Mother and Father were doing their best to get the Leisegangs, our next big threat, under control. This was all to ensure that Wilfried would become the next aub, but he seemed painfully oblivious to that fact.

“Lady Veronica’s education, hm...?” Brunhilde asked, covering her mouth with her hand to indicate surprise. “I never would have expected such opinions from Lord Wilfried, considering how hard he fought for Hannelore to become his second wife...”

I agreed; it was surprisingly common for Wilfried to say one thing and then do the complete opposite. “In the past, whenever he said or did something that concerned me, I assumed that he was letting Oswald manipulate him. He seems concerned about Leisegang nobles securing more power, which suggests that his former Veronica faction retainers are continuing to influence him. I had

thought that his twisted thought processes would improve after Oswald was relieved of duty. Now, we can only hope...”

“Relieved of duty?” Brunhilde repeated, her eyes wide. “I was told that Oswald resigned.”

“He was relieved of duty in secret and allowed to pass it off as a resignation. Wilfried is guaranteed to become the next aub now that he is engaged to Rozemyne, but Oswald was simply too dedicated to Lady Veronica’s methods. For that reason, I pleaded with Mother to remove him, but we could not act so openly. Relieving him of duty before the purge would have risked him leaking information to others in the former Veronica faction, so Mother determined it best to instead isolate him from the others at the Royal Academy. There, he was cornered and told to choose between resigning or being relieved of duty upon his return. He chose the former. Though, do keep all this a secret.”

“I thank you ever so much,” Brunhilde said, smiling. It seemed that I had obtained her trust by offering her a secret in return for the one she had given me. “Even now that Oswald is gone, Wilfried comes across as far more emotional of late. Do you know why that is?”

He had started ordering me to help him as his full sister, but I wasn’t sure whether he was making similar demands of those in Rozemyne’s service. “Perhaps there is an issue with the new head attendant. Oswald would often tell me to cede my accomplishments, but Wilfried was unaware of this. Now, however...”

“We should conclude that, rather than working in the shadows, Lord Wilfried’s retainers are directly instigating him to act in this way?”

Through this discussion with Brunhilde, it felt like I was beginning to see the truth beneath my brother’s irritating behavior. Our conclusions were little more than baseless extrapolations, however; further investigation was necessary.

“I do not know the details myself,” I said, “but it seems very likely. This is so blatantly unnatural that even Wilfried will come to distrust his retainers. I shall keep an eye on the situation.”

It really is worrisome that the supposed next aub is the most concerning factor in all this.

I exhaled slowly and picked up my teacup. We both took a moment to enjoy our drinks, and thus ended our discussion about my brother.

“To return to your original concern, Brunhilde... Fear not. My mother and I take no issue with your engagement. I still maintain that the burden is too great for someone of your age to bear alone, and I regret taking such a capable attendant from my sister, but those are separate matters...”

Not only was Brunhilde leaving to become a second wife, but Rihyarda had also returned to Father’s service. Rozemyne had already been in desperate need of more retainers, so her situation right now was surely dire.

“I intend to serve Lady Rozemyne until I graduate,” Brunhilde assured me with a consoling smile. “And if you are concerned about Rihyarda, she returned to the archduke’s service of her own volition. She said that Lady Rozemyne spends very little time in the castle and would scarcely feel her absence as a result.”

So my father *hadn’t* ordered Rozemyne to give up Rihyarda... Perhaps I was viewing him a little too harshly.

“Lady Charlotte... does Lady Florencia truly welcome me?” Brunhilde asked.

“Certainly. Mother has been pushing Father to take a second wife for years to help resolve the archducal family’s mana shortage. For that second wife to be of the same faction and capable of dealing with the Leisegangs, well... what more could she ask for? You are very welcome indeed.”

Finding a second wife who would not butt heads with the first was no easy task, but Brunhilde was perfect. She was of the same faction and could provide support to both Mother and Rozemyne. Not to mention, unlike with my sister, there was no need to teach her about female socializing. Her being underage also removed any worries of the engagement affecting Mother’s pregnancy. Indeed, there was no better choice in the world.

“It is relieving to hear that,” Brunhilde said. “In which case, might I ask you to help me integrate into the archducal family? I would have asked Lady Rozemyne, but she isn’t here in the castle for me to consult, and the last thing I want to do is burden her further...”

“Naturally. I will provide you with my full support,” I replied at once with a firm nod. “If you ever require my assistance, then you need only contact me. I, too, would like to make things easier for my sister.”

To say that Rozemyne was busy right now was an understatement. She was having to take on Uncle’s temple work *and* educate Melchior. She had also mentioned taking the playroom children into the temple.

Of course, that was still only scratching the surface. Even when it came to the printing industry or welcoming merchants from other duchies, Rozemyne was expected to do far too much. In particular, Mother and Father were focusing on internal noble politics this year, which meant that Rozemyne was almost entirely responsible for the more hands-on duties such as directing the commoners.

“In an ideal world,” I said, “I would be helping Rozemyne in the temple, but there is so much desk work to be done here in the castle as a result of the purge. Plus, I must admit, I am not yet used to how things operate there. I would only drag everyone else down.”

“Lady Rozemyne believes that people should focus on their strengths and allow others to compensate for their weaknesses, as evidenced by Philine and Damuel playing such valuable roles in her retinue.” She giggled, a teasing look in her eyes. “To be honest with you, Lady Charlotte, you have already been tremendously useful to us; Lady Rozemyne works with such dedication when we say it is for your sake.”

It seemed that I was being useful to Rozemyne after all. How wonderful.

She continued, “I would also like to assist my lady. Lady Rozemyne cannot socialize with the Leisegangs—or, rather, any such socializing would not benefit either party.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. Rozemyne was often unpredictable, but there was always a reason for her actions. And, in the end, her ideas would usually lead to good conclusions.

“As you know, Lady Rozemyne was raised in the temple. She didn’t spend any time with her wider family before her baptism. Even after she was baptized, the political climate meant she was forbidden from meeting with them on all but a

few carefully selected occasions. I cannot say I have ever seen her socialize with them.”

I knew that Rozemyne had been keeping her distance from most of her family to avoid them hailing her as the next Aub Ehrenfest, but it was news to me that she had never socialized with them at all.

“As a result,” Brunhilde continued, “Lady Rozemyne cannot empathize with her house’s anger toward and obsession with Lady Veronica, nor can she truly understand what they desire. In all likelihood, the Leisegangs will end up disillusioned with her and despair. I speak from experience, for I went through such a period myself.”

Again, I was surprised. In my eyes, Brunhilde had always been Rozemyne’s loyal retainer.

She elaborated, “Not only is Lady Rozemyne unable to grasp her house’s desires, but she also seems ill-equipped for conventional socializing—likely because she was asleep in her jureve for two years and entered the Royal Academy without proper experience.”

“But she made use of her own, unique methods to obtain connections with top-ranking duchies and the royal family. I could not hope to mimic that form of socializing myself. Even after seeing it up close at the Royal Academy, I cannot say that I understand it.”

Unlike my sister, Brunhilde had socialized with her family since she was a child—as was normal. Furthermore, because she had received a giebe’s education, she was an expert at using traditional methods to deal with other nobles. Then there was my sister, who had been raised in the temple, was completely unpredictable, and was very difficult to secure a meeting with. It was easy to guess which one a Leisegang who wanted influence over the archducal family would prefer working with.

“That said,” I continued, “I agree that Rozemyne would struggle to perform the more traditional socializing that the Leisegangs expect of her.” Because she had received no formal training and had needed to learn on the spot, her socializing was entirely unlike that of a normal bottom-ranking duchy.

“As stated earlier, I wish to keep the Leisegangs divided, but Lady Rozemyne is

not suited to such delicate maneuvering. It seems best to have her stick to socializing with other duchies.”

I agreed. Going forward, Ehrenfest needed to present itself as not a spineless duchy eager to obey those at the top of the rankings but a strong duchy that was determined to make its voice heard.

“At present, I do not believe there is much point in teaching bottom-ranking socializing to my sister,” I said. “Doing so will only cause confusion when she is meeting with the royal family or top-ranking duchies. Instead, we should push for the generational shift and start bringing the rest of the duchy up to her level.”

Brunhilde gave a firm nod of agreement. It was reassuring to know that we shared the same goal... but I wished that I could share her strength as well.

“Were you not frustrated to lose your position as the next giebe and have the job of containing the Leisegangs forced upon you?” I asked. “Erm... when my future as an archduchess was taken from me, it was quite some time before I regained my footing. I was hoping to learn from your experience so that I might do better in the future.”

Brunhilde knit her brow as if pondering her answer. “It would be a lie to say that I wasn’t disheartened. Even now, I wish to help Groschel grow and turn it into a city that can host merchants from other duchies. However, while I may have lost my future as a giebe, I am still Lady Rozemyne’s attendant. There are duties for me to complete and a path for me to tread.” Her lips curled into a bitter smile. “In truth, I was so busy attending my lady at the Royal Academy that I seldom had time to feel down.”

“In that case, will you not feel the loss more keenly once you become a second wife and cease being her retainer?”

“Not at all. I do feel some pressure due to the lack of time, but I do not feel sad.”

“‘The lack of time’?”

“Yes. There are only three, maybe four years before Lady Rozemyne comes of age, resigns from her position as High Bishop, and starts living in the castle as

the next aub's future wife. That is how long I have to take control of the Leisegangs for her and learn to socialize like a proper woman of the archducal family. I must compensate for Lady Rozemyne's weaknesses and ensure that she can live a life of comfort. Those are my duties as her retainer."

Even after her graduation, Brunhilde would remain Lady Rozemyne's retainer at heart and do everything in her power as the archduke's second wife to make her days easier. Her resolve was stronger than I expected, and seeing her proud, confident smile made me feel envious and inferior.

"Lady Charlotte... will you offer me your assistance?"

"But of course. Let us support Rozemyne together."

I gave Brunhilde a smile and a nod, but my facade did nothing to ease the discomfort inside of me. It was like there was a heavy weight pulling down on my heart.

I now understood that Brunhilde wanted to become Ehrenfest's second wife and that she had her own reasons for supporting the archducal family. My initial concerns had thus been resolved, but I was still in low spirits long after our discussion concluded.

Vanessa eyed me carefully. "You still seem down, milady. Might I ask what the two of you discussed? I know nothing of what transpired after the sound-blockers came out." She sounded concerned, but what could I say to her?

I proceeded with the utmost caution, not wanting to spill any of the secrets we had promised to keep. "Just as Lengurt feared, Brunhilde will no longer be the next Giebe Groschel, but she is not particularly depressed about that fact. She said that she remains Rozemyne's attendant and still has that path to follow. I was ever so shocked..."

Vanessa gave me a look of surprise; she knew exactly how I had felt after losing my future as an archduchess. "I was aware that Lady Brunhilde had a strong spirit, but even so..."

"She told me that she is becoming the second wife for Lady Rozemyne's sake, to help her when she comes of age and leaves the temple. I promised to assist

her with this effort.”

“Your discussion was productive, then?” Vanessa asked, watching me closely.

I nodded; speaking with Brunhilde really had eased my initial concerns. “There is no need for me to worry about her. Brunhilde is strong, has a clear goal in mind, and will put her all into her duties. All of my fears have been allayed, so why am I still so forlorn? I cannot help but feel that I have lost to her in some way, and it makes me all the more envious.”

Vanessa cast her eyes down and contemplated my admission. “Were you engaged in some form of competition, milady?”

“Not at all. But, well... I have been trying to be useful to Rozemyne, but I can offer only a pale shadow of the resolve and proactiveness that Brunhilde embodies. Now, I feel as though my determination to repay my sister has been much too weak.”

“Retainers and sisters have different roles to perform,” Vanessa replied with a chuckle—but there was more to my concerns.

“Being able to work with Brunhilde to support Rozemyne was exactly what I wanted, but... for some reason, I feel as though I have been left out. I am overcome with nothing but envy for Brunhilde.”

“Is your envy tinged with admiration? Or does it feel more akin to jealousy?” Vanessa probed. She was urging me to reflect on my feelings, so I thought back to the first time they had plagued me.

“My feelings were most similar to admiration. There was such determination in her eyes as she told me her plan to continue supporting my sister long into the future, and it made me feel so... incapable. I simply do not know how to face the future with such courage.”

“There is only so far you can plan ahead, milady. You are due to marry into another duchy, and your partner has not even been decided yet. This is not something worth fretting over.”

“Ah...”

That was true. I would eventually marry into another duchy to benefit

Ehrenfest. In other words, while Brunhilde and my sister were going to have a future together, I was destined to be sent away.

“I had hoped that Brunhilde, Rozemyne, and I would never be separated...” I murmured. “That we would always work together like we did in the Royal Academy...”

Female members of archducal families were tasked with marrying into other duchies to strengthen diplomatic ties. Small archducal families had the option of bringing a groom *into* their duchy so that he could offer support, but with Melchior growing up and a skilled politician such as Brunhilde supporting Rozemyne as the second wife, Ehrenfest no longer needed me. My value would come entirely from the connections made through my future marriage.

I understood that it was my duty to marry into another duchy... but I disliked the thought from the bottom of my heart. Learning that fact about myself was troubling.

“It seems that I have grown so sad and envious precisely because Brunhilde is such a splendid retainer,” I said. “I will one day need to leave Ehrenfest, meaning I cannot remain Rozemyne’s sister forever.”

“You need not corner yourself, milady.”

I smiled at Vanessa in response, but she must have seen through my charade; her brow furrowed in a way that made it clear she was hurting. It was the same face she had made when I was taken out of the running to become the next aub.

At this rate, I will simply worry my retainers again. I must get back on my feet somehow.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I remembered what Brunhilde had said to me: *“However, while I may have lost my future as a giebe, I am still Lady Rozemyne’s attendant. There are duties for me to complete and a path for me to tread.”*

“Be honest with me, Vanessa—will Rozemyne still be my big sister, even when I am in another duchy and no longer a member of the archducal family?”

“Hm? That goes without saying. Given how close you are, I can confidently

declare that not even duchy borders will sever your bond as siblings.”

Those words alone filled me with hope. “And will I still be able to support her?”

“But of course. The purpose of your marriage will be to tie Ehrenfest to another duchy. It will depend on where you end up, but once Lady Rozemyne becomes the first wife, the two of you will have opportunities to support one another.”

“Father said that he will do everything in his power to grant my requests when deciding which duchy I am to marry into. My desire is to go somewhere where I can continue working with my sister.”

If my sibling bond with Rozemyne would survive even after my departure from Ehrenfest, then I had no reason to lose to Brunhilde. There would surely be times when the first wife of another duchy would be more helpful than the second wife of the previous aub.

Now that I had something to work toward, the feelings of envy and inferiority that had tormented my heart were nowhere to be found.

Defense of the West Gate

“And that’s all the east gate has to report,” its commander said.

Roughly once per season, every commander in the city would gather in a meeting room near the central plaza. Today was one of those days. The summer meeting was normally the most stressful of all, since it took place right after the nobles’ Archduke Conference, but this year’s spring meeting was causing us more than enough grief. There were reports about the tense atmosphere that had plagued winter, *and* the triennial shift of commanders was being done.

“Right,” said the commander of the east gate. “Next up: the north gate. Gunther, how’s the north?”

I stood up. The north gate was connected to the Noble’s Quarter, so there were knights working shifts there too. That made it the easiest place for us to get intel on nobles—plus, the knights often had messages for the lower city. It was the duty of soldiers stationed at the north gate to discreetly ask about noble affairs, so when a commander asked, “How’s the north?” they really wanted to know about the Noble’s Quarter and the nobles even farther north.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t have any details, but the nobles who committed grave crimes were apparently caught and punished. There’s still some discord on the noble side, but we don’t need to be so on edge anymore—not for now, at least. They finished taking back the magic tools they lent us and said we could ease our guard. I’m also told that Lady Rozemyne returned to the temple after keeping her distance all winter, for her own safety.”

My report included details from the temple guards on top of what the knights of the north gate had told us, which earned me some chuckles from the others.

“You’re always so quick to get intel about Lady Rozemyne,” someone said.

“You’re not troubling the temple guards, are ya?” asked another.

Shut it. Now that Lutz and Tuuli are both live-in leherls, I don’t get as much

intel on Myne as I used to.

What choice did I have but to drop by the temple while on patrol and ask around? And, nah, I wasn't bothering them; in return for what they told me, I was putting in good words for them at the south gate and even occasionally showing my face there when the new noble orphans wanted to venture into the forest. Tit for tat.

"If we can ease our guard, that means we can shift commanders now, right?" asked the south commander.

"Probably?" I replied with a shrug. Anytime we changed places, there was an adjustment period of sorts during which communication and maneuvering were more laggard than usual. We hadn't wanted to take any chances, so we'd decided not to move the commanders until we were no longer on high alert.

"Nah, nah, nah. How about we just leave it for next year?" the east commander asked, then grimaced. "I don't want to go north while the nobles are still tense and everything."

"Nobody does," the west commander interjected. "The north gate's the worst, what with nobles always being there. The west and south ones are way more comfortable. Hahaha!" He was laughing as though it weren't his business at all.

That was when a soldier rushed in, gasping for breath. "Bad news, Commander!" he exclaimed.

We were *all* commanders, so it wasn't clear which one of us he was addressing. I was going to ask, when the west commander shot up and cried, "What happened?!"

"A noble from another duchy has arrived without a permit!"

"WHAT?!" In mere moments, the west commander had gone from laughing at his colleague to looking white as a sheet.

"You didn't let them in, did you?!" I demanded.

"No, sir!" the soldier reported. "I did my best to stop her! She went no farther, maybe because of the archduke's barrier!"

Noble trouble had come outta nowhere. Worst of all, it reminded me of the incident back when Myne had been an apprentice blue shrine maiden. Not being thorough back then had cost me my daughter. Then, half a year ago, a carriage with a noble crest had forced its way into the city and kidnapped some of the gray priests. A noble without a permit was sure to be bad news.

“The noble says that she’s engaged to Lord Hartmut, the High Priest, and that she’s Lady Rozemyne’s retainer—but can nobles from other duchies really be retainers?” the soldier spluttered. “I won’t get punished for stopping her, right?”

At no point had Myne, Lutz, Tuuli, or even the temple guards mentioned someone like that. “Forget that noble’s sob story!” I snapped. “No permit, no entry! It’s that simple!”

The soldier and the other commanders all stared at me in shock. Then, they nodded in agreement; they must have remembered what happened to the last commander who broke the rules.

“Did you use the magic tool to inform the Knight’s Order?!” I asked.

“That’s why I came to get the commander! There are apprentices waiting outside!”

Now that the tools distributed to every soldier over the winter had been taken back, the only ones that remained were those requiring the commanders’ permission to be used. For that reason, the soldier had run here with apprentices in tow.

The west gate commander rushed over to the window, threw it open, and started waving his arms around in a frantic display. “I GIVE PERMISSION!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

“HE GIVES PERMISSION!” cried the apprentice waiting closest to the window, flailing his arms in the same way.

The adults passing by must have seen the gathered soldiers and deduced that something serious was happening because they started relaying the message as well. Soon, a wave of shouts and gesturing rolled down the main street toward the west gate.

As for me, I'd sped out of the meeting room as soon as the first apprentice had shouted in response. I raced down the stairs and rushed outside. Everyone was staring toward the western gate. I did the same—just in time to see a red light shoot up into the air. The magic tool had been activated.

"Alright!" I shouted, then looked to the north gate. Another light, narrower than the one from the magic tool, shot up in response, signaling that the knight stationed there had acknowledged the call and would send word to the Knight's Order.

After seeing both lights, the nearby apprentice smiled up at the grave-looking commanders still watching from the window, then waved a red cloth. The north gate couldn't be seen from the meeting room, so he was indicating that a light had appeared there as well.

"We're running to the west gate!" I shouted to the other commanders at the window. "No matter what happens, we can't let that noble through!"

I don't care what it takes—she is not getting into the city!

Before they could even respond, I started sprinting to the west gate. The apprentice soldiers followed after me.

"Be on your guard, everyone! A noble from another duchy's trying to enter the city!" I shouted to the citizens we passed on the street. In the sky above, two highbeasts flew over our heads.

By the time we reached the west gate, the north gate's knights were questioning the noble and the girl accompanying her. One of the girls was wearing her hair up, meaning she had come of age, but she still looked fairly young. The other looked close to twenty.

Now this is rare...

I couldn't believe my eyes. Most noblewomen didn't even want to be seen by commoners; they would refuse to come out of their carriages and instead communicate through their servants. These two girls, however, were speaking with the knights directly. Even their attire was unusual, at least by noble standards—they were wearing fairly plain clothes that looked to be traveling attire. They were clearly suspicious.

The women were both wearing blue capes, which I was pretty sure confirmed they were from another duchy. I wasn't sure which duchy wore the color blue, but the knights definitely were.

They're being a lot more polite than usual. Are these nobles from a big-deal duchy?

The knights were speaking with the older woman, but the younger one seemed to be the main noble—based on how everyone kept double-checking things with her, at least. I understood a few bits and pieces about noble hierarchy from watching Myne and her guard knights, as well as from her temple attendants, but that was about it. I was really out of my depth here.

Hold on, shouldn't we be searching their carriage right about now?

I nudged one of the west gate soldiers, all the while keeping an eye on the knights and women, and whispered, "Hey... where's their carriage?" Seeing the quality of their transport or the crest emblazoned on it would surely tell me *something* about the girl making all these wild assertions. If she really was Myne's retainer, maybe we'd even find one of Tuuli's hairpins in her luggage.

Unfortunately for me, things weren't that simple. "They don't have a carriage," answered the soldier.

"How don't they have a carriage?"

"They flew here on those... Um, what's the word again? Highbeasts, right? 'Cause they're always so high up in the air or something. Anyway, they swooped down on those."

"They did what? This is too suspicious..." I murmured. The girls were so strange, in fact, that I started to doubt they were noblewomen at all.

"I was given permission to be Lady Rozemyne's retainer," the younger of the girls said. "Do not tell me that nobody informed you."

"My apologies, Lady Clarissa, but your medal proves only that you're an archnoble from Dunkelfelger," one of the knights replied. "We've seen nothing to indicate you are Lady Rozemyne's retainer, and you cannot enter the city without a permit from the aub. We shall send word to him now and see what he says. In the meantime, we must ask you to wait."

The knight then turned to me and said, “We need to go deliver a report and see about this permit. Guide these two to the waiting room for nobles, will you?”

After leaving us with the troublesome task of supervising the outsider nobles, the knight and a few others took off. We’d need to keep the girls busy until they returned, it seemed.

The west commander forced a smile and stepped in front of our unexpected guests. “Follow me, if you would.”

“Do people still not know I am Lady Rozemyne’s retainer?” Lady Clarissa grumbled once we’d arrived in the waiting room, her cheeks puffed out. “Just what has Hartmut been doing? How many times have I told him that I want to serve her as soon as possible?”

Her phrasing made me grimace. “Not even a noble from a top-ranking duchy can enter Ehrenfest without the archduke’s permission. How can you claim to be Lady Rozemyne’s retainer when you don’t even know that? Or Lord Hartmut’s fiancée, for that matter? The least you can do is start being honest with us.”

“No, Gunther! Stop!” shouted the west commander.

“I would have you take back those words and apologize,” declared the older woman. She must have been a knight because a weapon suddenly appeared in her hand—and it was pointed right at me. The west commander was floundering about, but I refused to back down.

“You two are already suspicious for not having a permit, and now you’re pointing a weapon at a soldier? You must not even know how much Lady Rozemyne treasures commoners. Do you know what she would say if you attacked us on the job and then forced your way into the city? If you claim to be her retainer, then at least act in a way that won’t damage her reputation.”

I wasn’t just being dramatic—a bad retainer really could damage the reputation of their lord or lady. If these idiots couldn’t even understand that, then I really didn’t want them going near Myne. The last thing she needed were retainers who looked down on commoners. Having people like that around would keep us from being able to speak at the monastery. Instead, she needed

more retainers like Lord Damuel.

“Put that thing away, Griselda.”

“But, Lady Clarissa...”

“I already know that Lady Rozemyne treasures commoners. She has favored merchants and is respected by the people. This soldier is likely speaking the truth—though he is the rudest commoner I have ever met.” Lady Clarissa then shot me a triumphant grin and said, “*However*, it is absolutely true that I am engaged to Hartmut and have been permitted to serve Lady Rozemyne. If you know so much about her, then you should also know that she likes her retainers to be treated with respect. You would do well to speak with more care. I suppose you still might not believe me, though; as a commoner soldier, you must be oblivious to the deals and promises made at the Royal Academy.”

Her taunting smile really ticked me off, partly because she was right—I was just a soldier and didn’t know much about noble society. As much as I wanted to know more about the world my daughter now lived in, my options were painfully limited. Still, there were *some* things I could learn at work.

“I still don’t believe that you’re engaged to Hartmut. If you were, then you would have come with your bridal luggage, and the groom’s family would have welcomed you at the border gate with the permit you need. In all my time as a guard, I’ve seen plenty of noblewomen marry into Ehrenfest, but never have I seen one arrive without her partner or any family. How could we *not* deem you suspicious?”

I must have struck a nerve because Lady Clarissa’s blue eyes shot wide open. “Excuse me?!” she cried. “How rude!”

“Coming from someone trying to force her way in without a permit!”

As we growled and glared at each other, Lady Griselda shook her head in exasperation. “Lady Clarissa, in this exchange at least, the soldier is entirely correct.”

“What?! You’re taking his side, Griselda?!”

“I simply cannot agree with you. Neither one of us can deny that you came here out of the blue.”

All of a sudden, they were arguing with each other. I no longer felt hostile toward them; they were strange, but they didn't seem like bad people.

I sighed. "If you want us to trust you, then I'd suggest getting in contact with your fiancé, Lord Hartmut. Nobles have those talking birds they can send off, right? If you really are getting married, he should reply. Just be warned—I know what his voice sounds like. You won't be able to trick me."

"Would a commoner here truly know his voice, I wonder?"

"Of course," I said. "We speak to him at the temple."

Whenever we soldiers met with Myne before leaving for Spring Prayer or the Harvest Festival, and whenever we returned with gray priests from Hasse, Lord Hartmut would always greet us—assuming he was there at the temple. Then, he'd start asking us about Myne, eager to learn everything he could. I'd initially kept my guard up, wondering what he was after, but Lutz and Gil had since explained that he was her loyal vassal.

And that made him seem like even more of a suspicious weirdo.

With a flick of the wrist, Lady Clarissa produced one of those sticks that all nobles have, then created a white bird. "I just arrived at Ehrenfest's west gate," she said to it, "but the guards aren't letting me through. Nobles from other duchies require a permit from the aub, apparently. What should I do?"

She then swung her stick, sending the white bird through the wall and out of sight. It wasn't long before it returned with a response.

"This is Rozemyne."

The bird had been addressed to Lord Hartmut, but this message was clearly from Myne. I would never mistake my daughter's voice. The way she addressed Lady Clarissa at least proved that they knew each other.

Lady Clarissa saw my surprise and gave me a smug look. "See? I *am* Lady Rozemyne's retainer."

Then, the bird continued: "Clarissa, obey the soldiers and stay where you are. If you defy them, I will have you sent straight back to Dunkelfelger."

Myne was very obviously furious. Lady Clarissa faltered, her arrogance turning

into unease. She really hadn't expected to get scolded.

"So you've gotta stay here and obey our orders, huh?" I scoffed. "Good to know."

"You expect ME to obey YOU?! That is CLEARLY crossing a line!"

"You heard the bird, didn't you?!"

"I shall obey Lady Rozemyne but not any of you!"

As we glared at each other, Lord Damuel and Lady Angelica arrived. "Gunther, leave it at that," Lord Damuel said. "We've come here on Lady Rozemyne's orders, since a noble from a top-ranking duchy is a bit much for commoners to deal with. We'll take care of the rest."



The soldiers began to cheer.

“That’s Lady Rozemyne for you. She knows what’s up!”

“Lord Damuel! Thank you so much!”

“Hey! Go tell the citizens that everything’s safe now!”

Whenever Lady Rozemyne had business in the lower city, she sent Lord Damuel. He was a nice person and wasn’t the least bit arrogant, unlike so many other nobles. On top of that, he knew about Myne’s past. He really was the knight I could trust most.

The other soldiers shared my opinion. Lord Damuel and Lady Angelica were always assigned to accompany us during religious ceremonies, so most of us were familiar with them.

After conveying Lady Rozemyne’s message, Lord Damuel knelt before Lady Clarissa and the knight accompanying her. “I am Damuel, a layknight. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the pure rivers flowing from Flutrane the Goddess of Water?”

“You may.”

“O Flutrane, Goddess of Water. May you grant this meeting your blessing.”

A green light came out of the ring Lord Damuel was wearing. We were seeing how nobles greeted each other. Highbeasts were cool and perfect for knights, but kneeling and offering blessings was really cool too.

I wonder whether I could somehow imitate their proposal feystones...

As I considered that thought, Lord Damuel started telling Lady Clarissa what the plan was. Apparently, she was going to have to wait a while before the permit could be sent over.

“Hartmut and Lady Rozemyne are in a meeting right now, and they’ve asked that you wait here. Lady Rozemyne will come as soon as the meeting is over and she has obtained the permit.”

“Oh, is that so?” Lady Clarissa replied with a smile. “Understood, then. I shall wait patiently until Lady Rozemyne comes for me.” She had been unrelenting in

her attempts to get through the gate when we soldiers and the knights from the north had tried to stop her, but now she was being unusually obedient.

Lord Damuel started to relax, but it was short-lived. Lady Clarissa continued to smile, but her blue eyes had the glint of a carnivore that had just found its prey.

“In the meantime,” she said, “please tell me what you can about Lady Rozemyne and Ehrenfest. There must be things I should know before I start serving her here.”

Lord Damuel was clearly overcome with fear. Seeing him in such a state made me feel bad for him, but at the same time...

That's a good idea, Lady Clarissa! I wanna hear too!

I clenched my fists; this was a rare opportunity to hear about Myne's life as a noble. She wasn't meeting with the merchants as much these days, and it was even harder to speak openly with her now that she had those nobles accompanying her. In other words, I was starved of news. It didn't help that Lutz and Tuuli were coming home less often as a result of their apprenticeships.

“This way, Lord Damuel. Do come with us, Lady Angelica.”

Lady Angelica shook her head. “I shall focus on guarding the door. Damuel, I entrust you with hosting Clarissa.” She then planted her feet firmly in front of the waiting room's door, placed a hand on the hilt of her sword, and started scanning the room. Her movements were so practiced that it was clear how faithfully she guarded Myne each day. I had hoped to get news from her too, but I would need to settle for what I could get from the others.

“Gunther, are you...?” Lord Damuel asked.

“I'll stay until the permit arrives,” I replied. “We'll take care of security.” Then, I thumped my right fist against the left side of my chest a few times as a show of respect.

“Eh... Guess it'll be a good way to kill some time,” Lord Damuel said with a half-smile, then turned to face Lady Clarissa again. “However, as I would not know where to begin otherwise, could I ask you to at least give me some questions to answer? And, my apologies—I will not be able to discuss Ehrenfest's industries in significant detail. I hope you can understand.”

Lady Clarissa nodded and said, “Naturally. Now, first, tell me about Lady Rozemyne’s daily routine. I am already familiar with how her days flow in the Royal Academy, but how do things compare here in Ehrenfest? Are there any notable differences between her temple and castle schedules? How often does she visit the temple?” Her questions were flowing out like a river.

“One at a time, please,” Lord Damuel said weakly. “Her life in the castle isn’t all that different from her life in the Royal Academy. Her retainers meet at second bell, which is when she gets out of bed.”

“Oh, that is rather late,” Lady Griselda remarked, looking surprised. “How does she have time for her morning training?”

“They don’t do that here,” Lady Clarissa replied with a knowing expression. “Those from Ehrenfest don’t train in the morning—not even in the Royal Academy.”

I didn’t have a clue what they were on about. Morning training? Surely that wasn’t something for a noblewoman who wasn’t even a soldier or a knight to be doing.

Wait... I remember hearing that Myne would wander around the knight training grounds to improve her stamina. Maybe all noble girls do that.

“I should note that second bell is when Lady Rozemyne *rises*, not when she first opens her eyes,” Lord Damuel clarified. “She often wakes up much earlier so that she can read in bed. Philine has informed me that one of the scholars’ primary duties is managing to tease books away from Lady Rozemyne when it comes time for her to get out of bed.”

“Oh!” Lady Clarissa brightly exclaimed. “I will need to help them with that task, then.”

From what I could gather, most noblewomen didn’t spend every morning reading in bed, nor did their scholars need to perform “morning duties.” Lady Clarissa had a distinct sparkle in her eyes as she took in this flurry of new information about Myne. Something told me that we might actually be able to get along after all.

“Then, once Lady Rozemyne is ready for the day ahead, it is time for

breakfast,” Lord Damuel continued. “That is when male retainers are allowed to start entering her chambers.”

It was a blissful conversation, all in all. I got to spend some time finding out about my daughter’s life in the world of nobles—that is, until another of those white birds arrived for Lord Damuel.

Having been told that the permit had been issued and that Myne was coming to the west gate, we left the noble waiting room and went to the top of the tower, where she would have room to land her highbeast. The soldiers and the west commander came with us.

Not long after we had gotten into formation, Myne landed with Lord Hartmut and some other nobles. She raised a hand to stop Clarissa from running over to her, then tapped her chest twice and looked at the saluting soldiers.

Aah, she’s growing up.

I usually wouldn’t get to speak with her or even see her up close outside of when we went to the monastery. Maybe it was because the day of our separation had made such a lasting impression on me, but part of me still pictured Myne as being the same sweet, innocent girl from back then. That was why it always surprised me to see how grown-up she was now. By this point, she carried herself completely like a noble too.

Feeling a pleasant warmth in my chest, I started mediating between Myne and the west commander. My daughter gave me a reassuring smile, then handed the permit and money to the commander.

“You soldiers have worked hard to protect Ehrenfest, and we would never punish you for that. In fact, I believe some praise is in order.”

Myne thanked the commander and the soldiers, then swiftly left with Ladies Clarissa and Griselda. I’d wanted to spend more time with my daughter, but having her stay for too long would have caused problems for the other soldiers. It was tough.

“Commander! Commander!” one of the soldiers called out. “How much did you get from Lady Rozemyne?”

“Let’s put it to good use once you and the other commanders have finished your swap!” added another. “Don’t go hogging it!”

“Going all the way back to the central meeting room sounds like a pain, though. How about we head to the bar and arrange the swap there?”

From there, the soldiers continued chatting among themselves, more at ease now that the nobles were gone. The west commander was going to treat everyone with the two large silvers that Myne had given him.

“So yeah...” I said. “Seems like nobles from other duchies are now gathering around Lady Rozemyne.”

“I see,” Effa replied. “She really must have her hands full. Still, Gunther—if you’re not going to calm down, could you at least get changed and sit down? You came back early, but I assume you’re still going to drink more, right?”

After heading to the bar and having my free drink, courtesy of the west commander, I’d come straight home. I did as my wife asked and got changed. We hadn’t even gotten into the stuff that Lord Damuel had mentioned about Myne’s new life, so I expected our conversation to continue long into the night.

“Lady Rozemyne grew a lot over the winter,” I said. “She’s starting to look like a proper lady, if you ask me. Also, she was wearing this real stern expression today. When she came to the west gate to fetch Lady Clarissa, she was pulling a face like...”

“We’ll need to tell Tuuli about that later. Or maybe she’s already used to seeing it!”

Effa must have been enjoying this as much as I was, since she’d also gone so long without any updates on Myne. She happily listened to me ramble on while pouring some wine. Kamil, on the other hand, looked bored out of his mind.

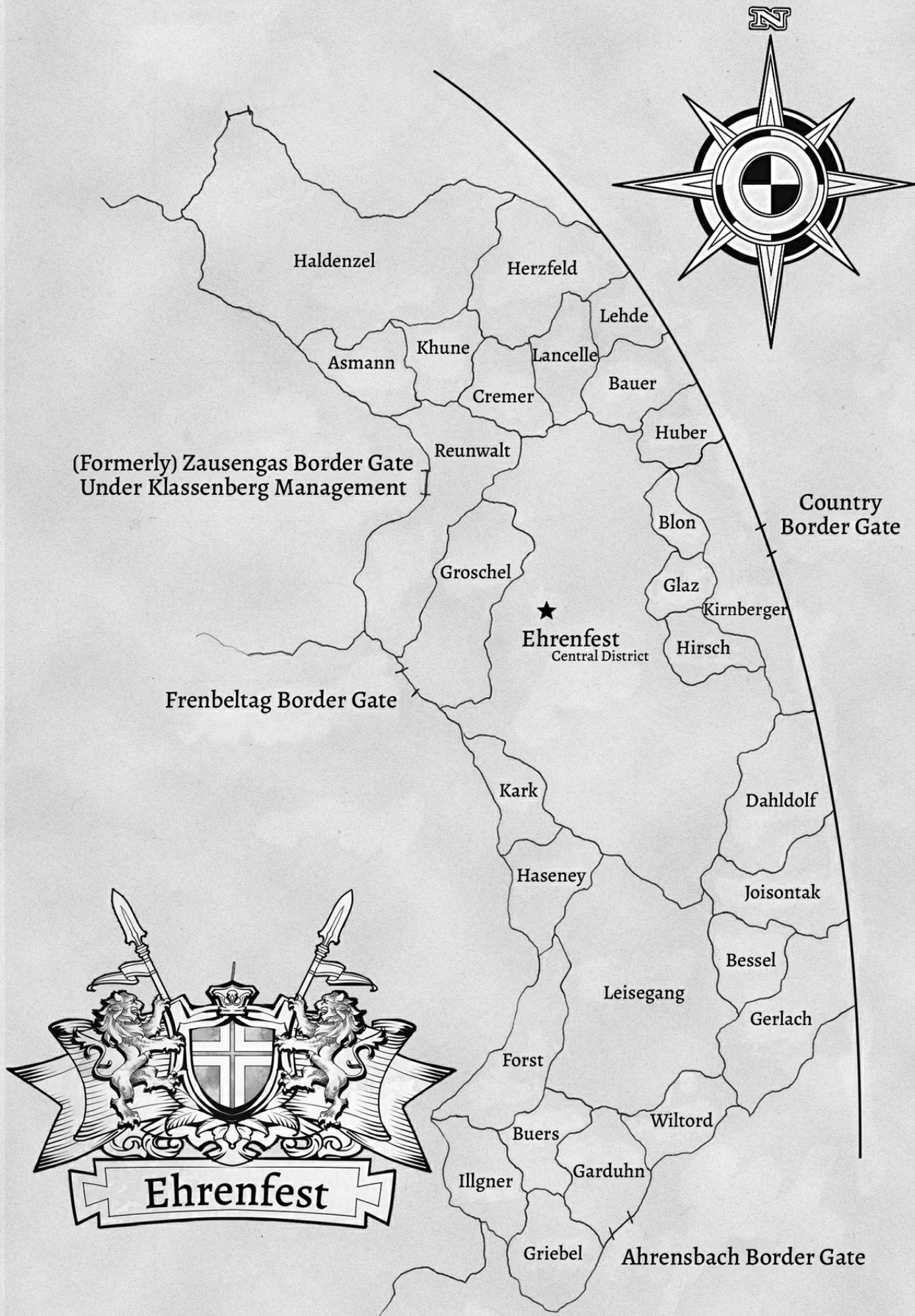
“You, Mom, Tuuli... Everyone in our family starts acting so weird whenever Lady Rozemyne is mentioned,” he said while eating his dinner. He didn’t remember Myne, so he didn’t really like hearing about her. He had decided to become an apprentice at the Plantin Company, though, so that lack of interest was sure to change.

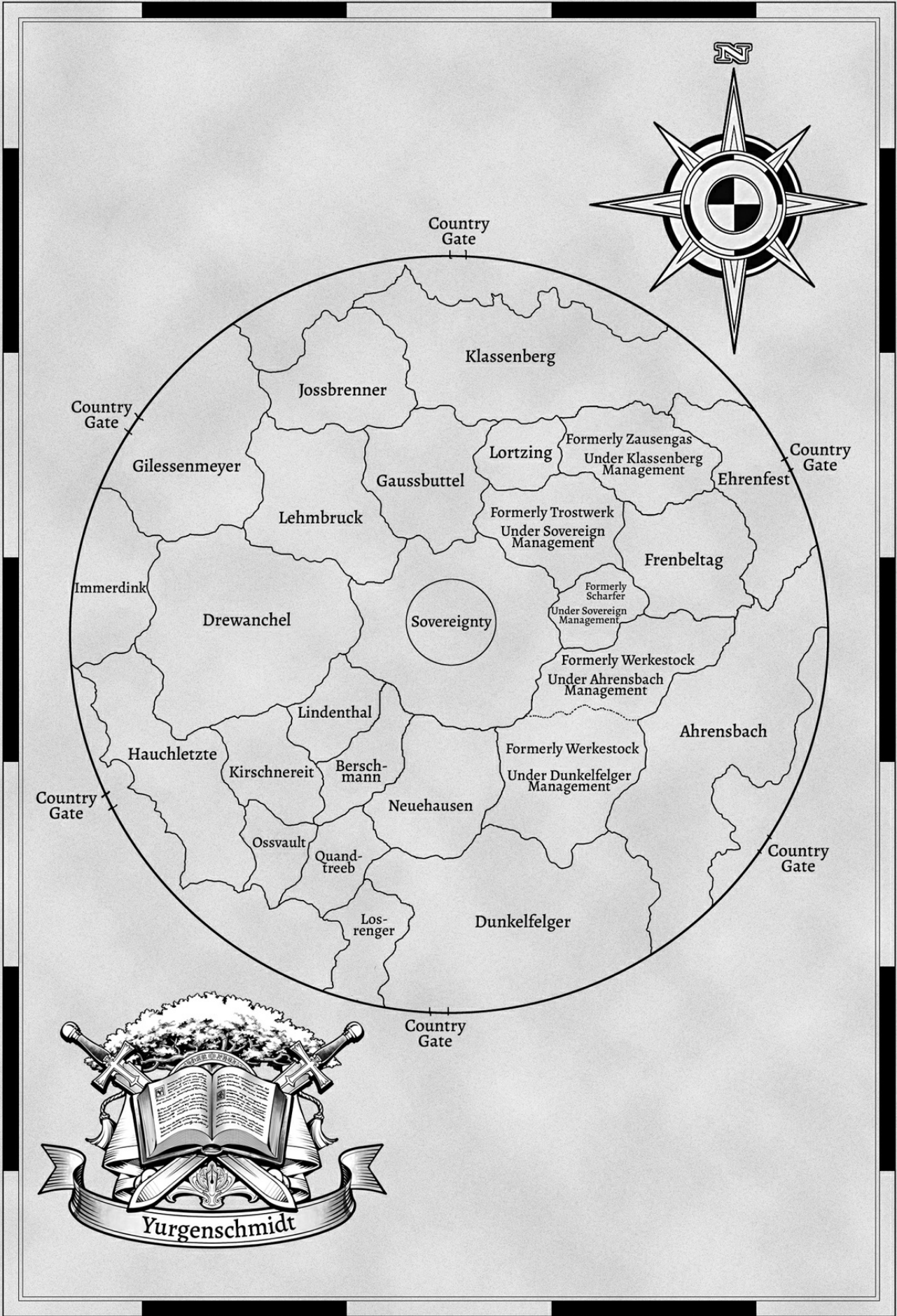
“You’ll understand soon enough, Kamil. Just you wait.”

“Even after I start my apprentice work, I’m not gonna turn into weirdos like you guys!” Kamil snapped, as prickly as ever.

I glanced at Effa, she glanced at me, and we both laughed. Kamil would never recognize Myne as his elder sister, but his apprenticeship at the Plantin Company meant they were destined to meet. I raised my mug while imagining what that day might be like.

“Praise be to Vantole.”





Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 4*.

For this volume's prologue, we have a story from Lamprecht's perspective—the first in quite a while. He doesn't interact with Rozemyne very often, despite being her brother, because he serves Wilfried as a guard knight. On a brighter note, his son was born, making him a father! I decided to focus on how Lamprecht sees Rozemyne and her retainers, what lessons Elvira drilled into him, and his relationship with his wife. He really is at his happiest.

The main story began with the archduke candidates' return to Ehrenfest. After being unified for such a long time, the archducal family was fractured as a result of the desires and demands of the Leisegangs. As everyone's hopes for the future fell out of alignment, small buds of distrust grew into something more sinister.

From there, Rozemyne visited Kirnberger's closed country gate. The other duchies with country gates are unable to open or close them because of the missing Grutrissheit, but Kirnberger's situation is a little more complicated. Its gate was sealed long ago by the ruling Zent of the time—so long ago, in fact, that Ehrenfest hadn't even existed, and Kirnberger had instead been a part of a duchy called Eisenreich.

The theme of this volume could perhaps be described as the shift from one generation to the next. The purge completely eradicated the former Veronica faction, making the Leisegangs an undisputed power. Then, Brunhilde was announced to be joining the archducal family as the aub's second wife! Things aren't as straightforward as they seem, though; even within the Leisegangs, there's a big difference between what the older and younger generations want.

Melchior starts visiting the temple to be trained as the new High Bishop, which makes Rozemyne very conscious of the fact that she will one day need to resign from her position. The Gutenbergs have reached a point where they can

delegate long-term business trips to their disciples instead of going themselves. Some fight against the flowing river of time, while others wish to accelerate it...

The epilogue was written from the perspective of Alexis, one of Wilfried's guard knights. In it, I depicted the neutral son of Giebe Kirnberger trying to process both his father's perspective and his own feelings about his changed lord. Judithe shares a hometown with him, but he doesn't think much about factions, so he didn't notice the significance there. He didn't think anything about Wilfried being so close to Veronica either, nor did he feel the need to unify as the Leisegangs did. How will the scolding he receives from his father change him going forward...?

This volume's first original short story was from Charlotte's perspective and explores her pain, compassion, and aspirations. She feels responsible for Brunhilde becoming her father's second wife, unaware that Brunhilde made the proposal to begin with.

The second short story was written from Gunther's perspective and shows Clarissa's arrival at the west gate through the eyes of the lower city. I decided to make it fast-paced and comical rather than serious. It was so much fun—and so easy—to write Gunther; his love for his family never wavers in the slightest.

Four characters received designs for this volume: Leberecht, Bertram, Alexis, and Giebe Kirnberger. All men, huh? (Haha.)

As you'd expect from Hartmut's father, Leberecht is both a very talented and a very cunning scholar. I've always imagined him as the person Hartmut would have grown up to be had he never met Rozemyne.

Bertram is Laurenz's paternal half-brother, who was taken to the orphanage during the purge. He maintains his noble pride, but it seems to be putting him in an even more dangerous position...

Alexis recently became an adult and serves Wilfried as a guard knight. I think he's grown to be super cool. As for his father, Giebe Kirnberger, he has an intense aura and tends to operate personally. There's a nice familial resemblance between them.

I also have some announcements.

Bookworm came second in the tankobon category of *This Light Novel is Amazing!* 2021. Thank you to everyone who supported me!

Part 4 of the manga adaptation is starting to be serialized. So many readers told us how much they wanted to see the Royal Academy illustrated, so we received approval to start early! Please look forward to it, the upsurge of retainers, and the adorable Schwartz and Weiss, all in manga form.

As I write this, Part 2 Volume 5 and Part 3 Volume 4 of the manga are being made ready for release. A lot of readers will probably find it confusing that Parts 2, 3, and 4 are being adapted at the same time, but please do enjoy them all.

The cover art for this volume gives off such a tragic, heavy atmosphere, reflecting how each member of the archducal family is going in a different direction. I think it does an excellent job of embodying the contents of this book.

The color illustration shows Rozemyne being led to Kirnberger's country gate. A more accurate portrayal would have included the border gate along with it, but I wanted to isolate the country gate for emphasis.

Shiina-sama, thank you very much.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 5.

October 2020, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

I'M SORRY
ABOUT MY
RETAINER. I
REALLY AM.

OH NO. OH NO.
NO, NO. IT REALLY
IS LADY ROZEMYNE.
AND THAT GIRL
REALLY WAS HER
RETAINER! AM I
GOING TO BE
DEMOTED? FIRED?
SOMETHING EVEN
WORSE?!

CLURK CLURK

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

THE GATE GUARDS,
EXPECTING TO BE
PUNISHED FOR
HOW THEY DEALT
WITH CLARISSA.

AS
OUR
SAINT
COM-
MANDS!

WELL
DONE. I'M
SO PROUD
OF YOU
ALL. KEEP
UP THE
GOOD
WORK!

B
R
A
I
N
W
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N
G

LADY
ROZE-
MYNE!

HOW ARE
THINGS,
EVERYONE?

OR-
PHAN-
AGE

WHAT?
REALLY?!
I CAN'T
WAIT!

HARTMUT...
WE NEED
TO HAVE
A TALK.

SCOO!

WE'VE
PLAYED
KARUTA,
AND WE
DID SO
MUCH
MATH!

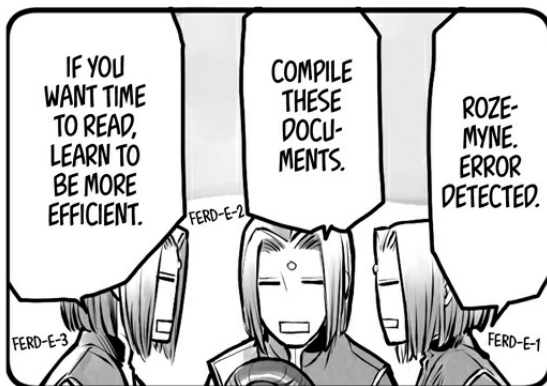
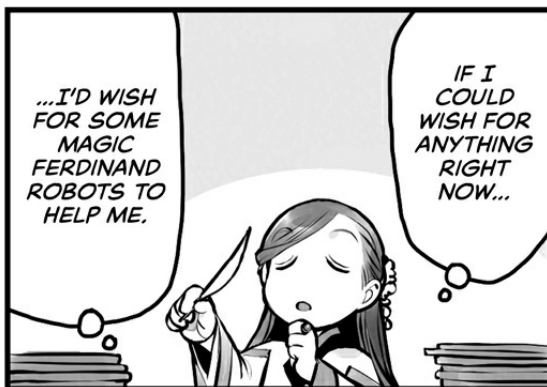
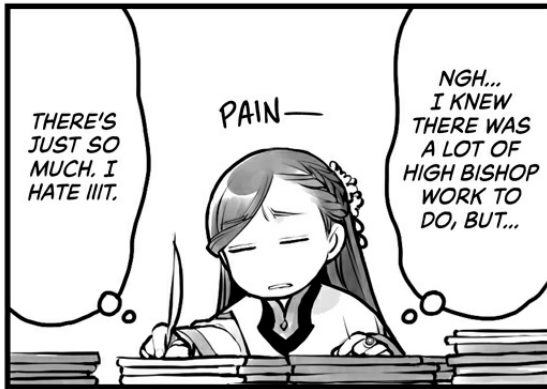
meee!

WINTER
PREP IS
GOING FINE!
WE'VE BEEN
DOING OUR
BEST IN THE
WORKSHOP
TOO!

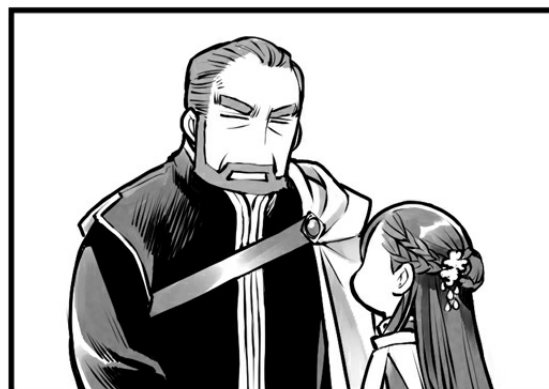
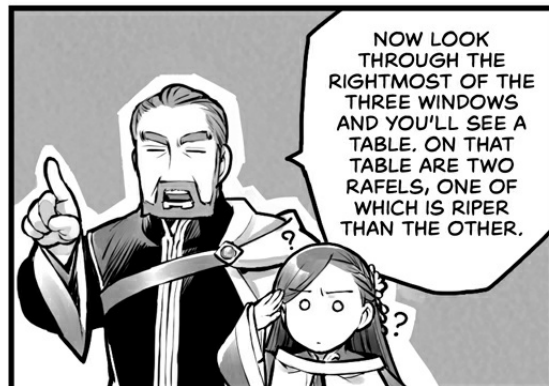
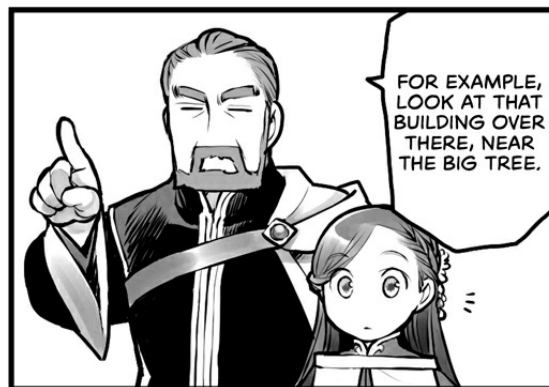
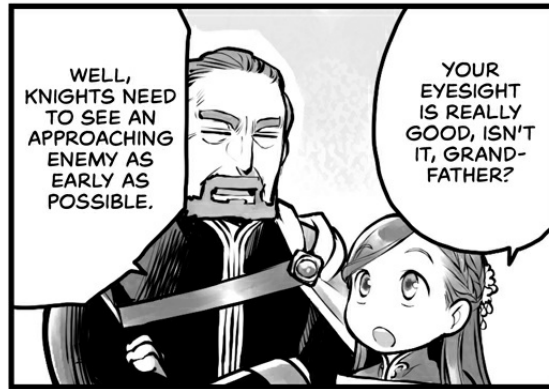
me too!

And me!

HARSH REALITY

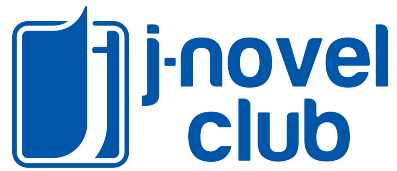


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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 4

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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